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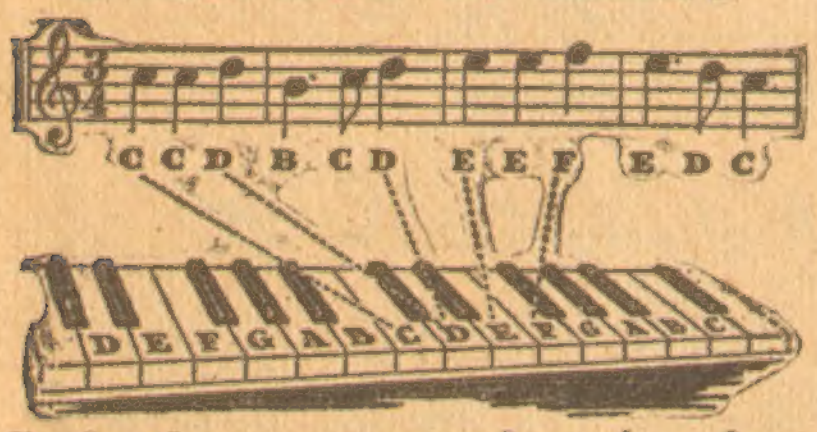

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DOC SWAP'S DOUBLE DARE ***by Ben Frank*** **79**
A hot-headed boast sends the tradin' hombre on the trail of an owlhooter.

AND

THE FRONTIER POST ***by Captain Starr*** **6**
A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters.

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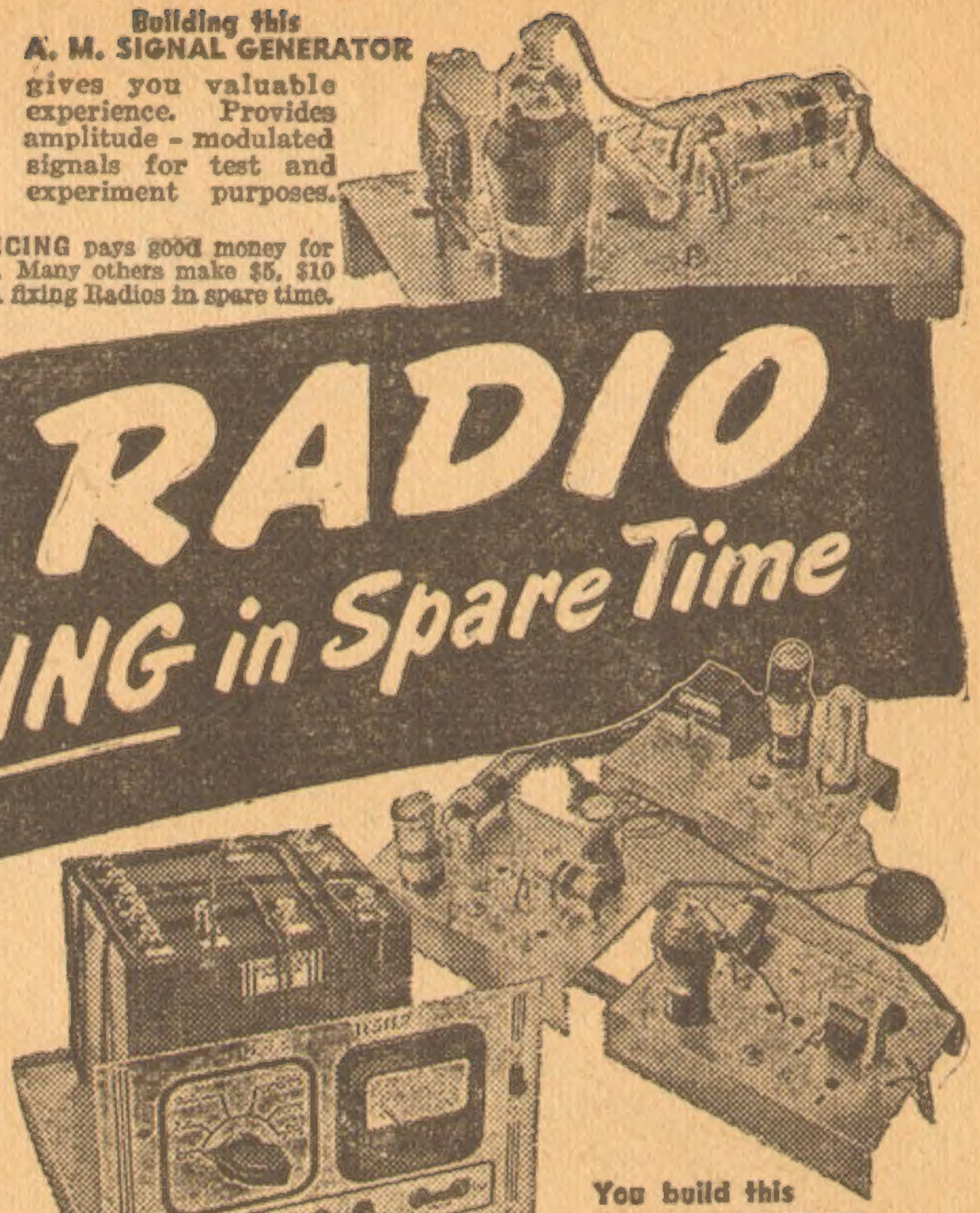

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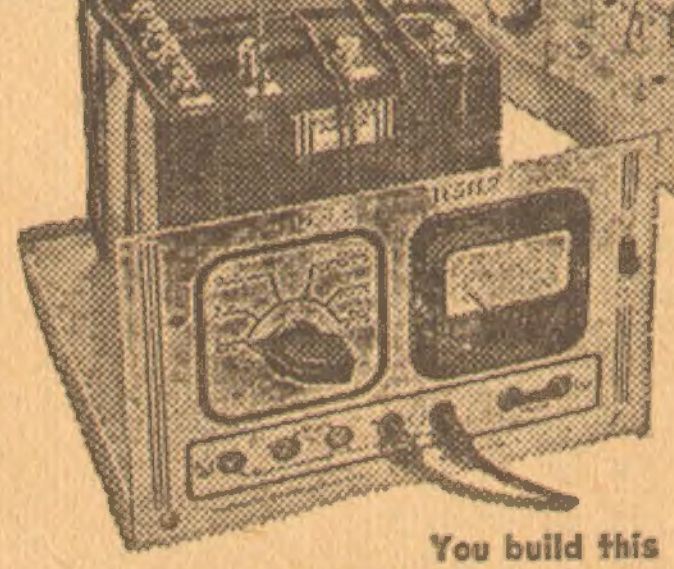

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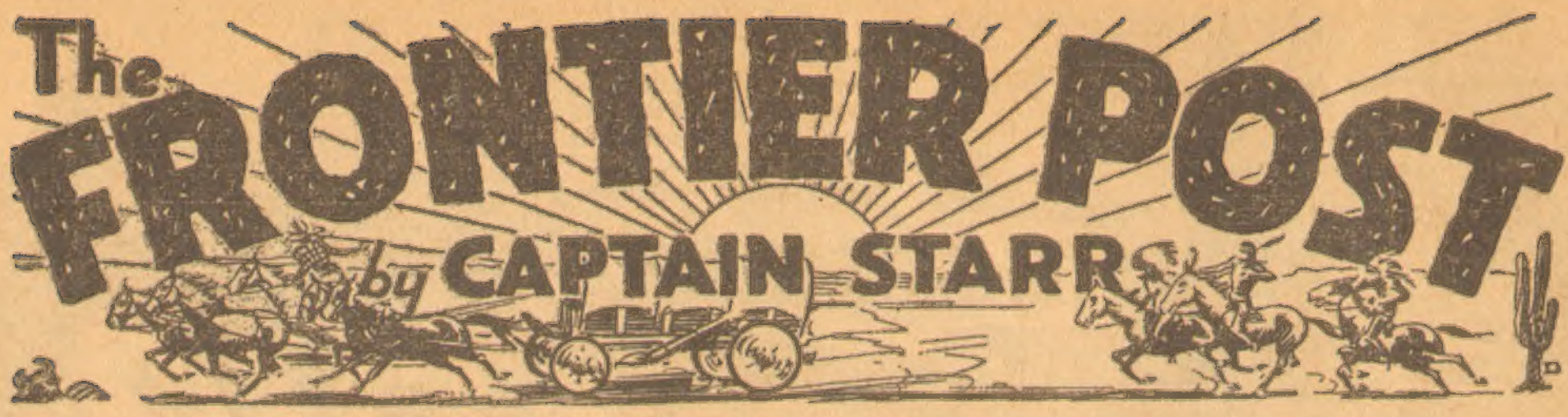

HIYA, gals and galluses! This is an important year out here in the Western range country. Why? Because grazing permits are renewed every tenth year in the 155 national forests. And this is the year of renewal.

A big part of rangeland, from Texas west, is in the national forests. Grazing permits are held by 22,091 ranchers for 1,192,255 head of cattle and 4,454,011 sheep, according to Lyle F. Watts, chief of the U. S. Forest Service.

A few days back I crossed trails with this man Watts while he was on an inspection tour. Somehow you wouldn't think of our Forestry Chief as a man who has a big say-so in the cattle business. Most Americans think of our forest reserves in terms of timber, because an evergreen tree is the symbol of the Forest Service. Yet the grass blanket of the forests is as valuable a resource as the growth of fir and pine.

A Big Battle

Right now Mister Watts has a big battle on his hands. He aims to cut down the number of animals grazing in national forests. The range management section of the Forest Service claims that the western range has been seriously over-grazed, that the only way to bring it back into full capacity and prevent damaging erosion is to give the range a rest.

Some ranchers agree. Others resent the policy and claim that a reduction of grazing permits will only turn over to deer, elk and antelope the grass taken away from their cattle and sheep.

Dry Years in Arizona

The ruckus centers mainly in Arizona, which has suffered a series of dry years. The Forest Service proposes to reduce by one-half the number of grazing permits in Arizona's Tonto National Forest. Stockmen there are hollering that it's a scheme to cut down some ranchers' permits so that new outfits can put their animals on the range. The proposition is labelled "distribution reduction."

The objecting stockmen have put up such a protest that Congress is pawing the air over the McCarran bill which opposes grazing reduction on the distribution basis. Mr. Watts is against the McCarran bill. So we have a modern range war brewing and it extends over 11 states of the Far West and into Texas.

History Repeats Itself

It's a pretty complicated situation. Suppose you were a new settler and wanted a permit to graze a few head. But found you couldn't do so because some old-time stockman leased that range area and always had. You'd be hostile. And the old-timer, he'd hackle up if some of his leased grass went to you. Because he had depended on it for years.

There you have a case of the little fellow against the big one. History is repeating itself. It's the same as when nesters or homesteaders moved in on the open range of early settlers.

Mr. Watts' job is to work out some sort of compromise whereby the rights of established beef producers are protected, yet new settlers will have some access to forage.

In the old days they settled matters of this kind with six-guns. Nowadays they use politer weapons—fountain pens and figures!

Regulation Necessary

Myownself, I don't crave to be in Mister Watts' boots, even if ballistics have given way to statistics. Anybody who has been around and through western rangeland plumb realizes the need for regulation. I've seen the erosion in Tonto basin that is filling up Roosevelt dam with silt. The grass has been trampled and gnawed away, the anchoring sod has vanished and the soil blows away

(Continued on page 8)

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

in dry weather and washes away in wet seasons.

Regulation is needed, sure. But when it pinches somebody's feet or pocketbook there's a holler that's heard clear to Washington. It's natural that a Congressman is more interested in votes than he is in the dead skeleton of a future rangeland. So the Forest Service efforts at conservation get a lambasting from all sides.

The Injuns Had It Easier

Well, anyhow, this shows you Ranger Club folks that modern cow ranching ain't all guitar playing in the moonlight and thrills in saddle. It has problems, same as any other business. It's in times such as these that you hear ranchers say that we better give it all back to the Injuns.

Of course, they're only half-serious. But the truth is, the original Americans had an easier time of it, in some ways, than us later inhabitants.

I've heard this subject debated beside many a campfire. It's always interesting. The main reason that life was simpler for the redmen was that there was fewer of 'em. The guess of experts is that barely one million was the Indian population of the whole American continent north of Mexico, compared to our modern population of 140 millions, plus.

The aboriginals of United States lived in what we of today would call poverty. They were poor because they lacked knowledge of the riches surrounding them. For them no coal existed, no petroleum, no metals beyond nuggets of pure copper which they hammered into crude implements. Of electrical energy they never dreamed, for that was only a plaything of the mighty storm gods who hurled lightning when they were out of sorts.

Their agriculture, so crude, used only tiny patches of half-cultivated soil. Their groups were small and divided and at war with one another most of the time. Labor practically didn't exist. Trade was on a simple swap basis.

A Roamer and Hunter

Of course, the Indian didn't want much. Possession was a burden to him. He was a roamer and a hunter, and surplus belongings were a chore to tote around and he didn't have any bank to stash 'em in. Only the pueblo tribes had any means for storing up so much as a month's supply of food. So the Indian had a precarious food supply, flimsy

(Continued on page 10)

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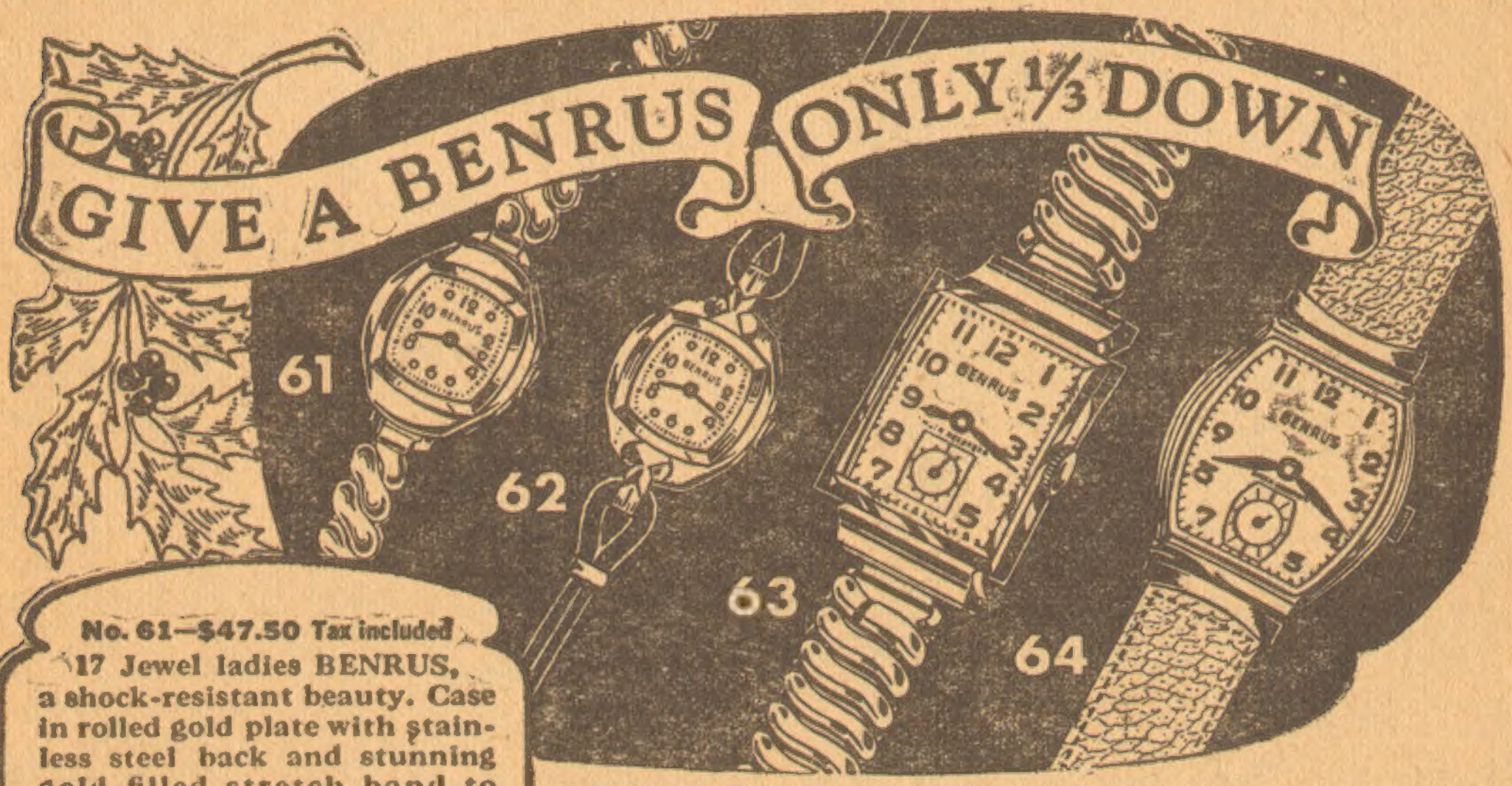

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(Continued from page 8)

housing, hardly any way at all for taking care of sickness or injury.

He roved, hunted and fought and when his eyes grew dim, his bones brittle with age, a burden to fellow tribesmen he went off alone in the wilderness and died. The Indian standard of living was a mighty low one, compared to ours.

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(Continued on page 91)

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JIM DIVED INTO TROUBLE BUT THEN...

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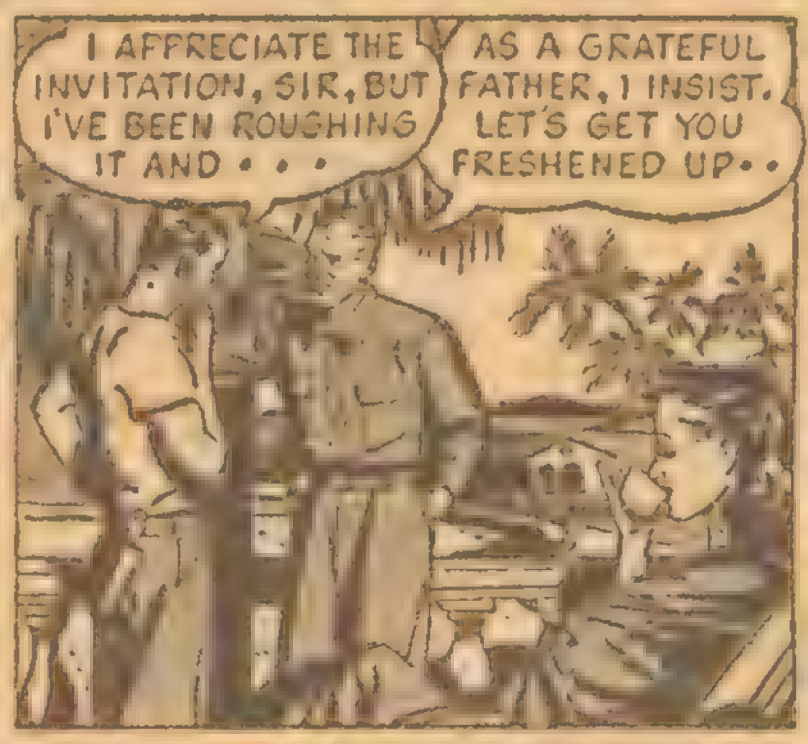
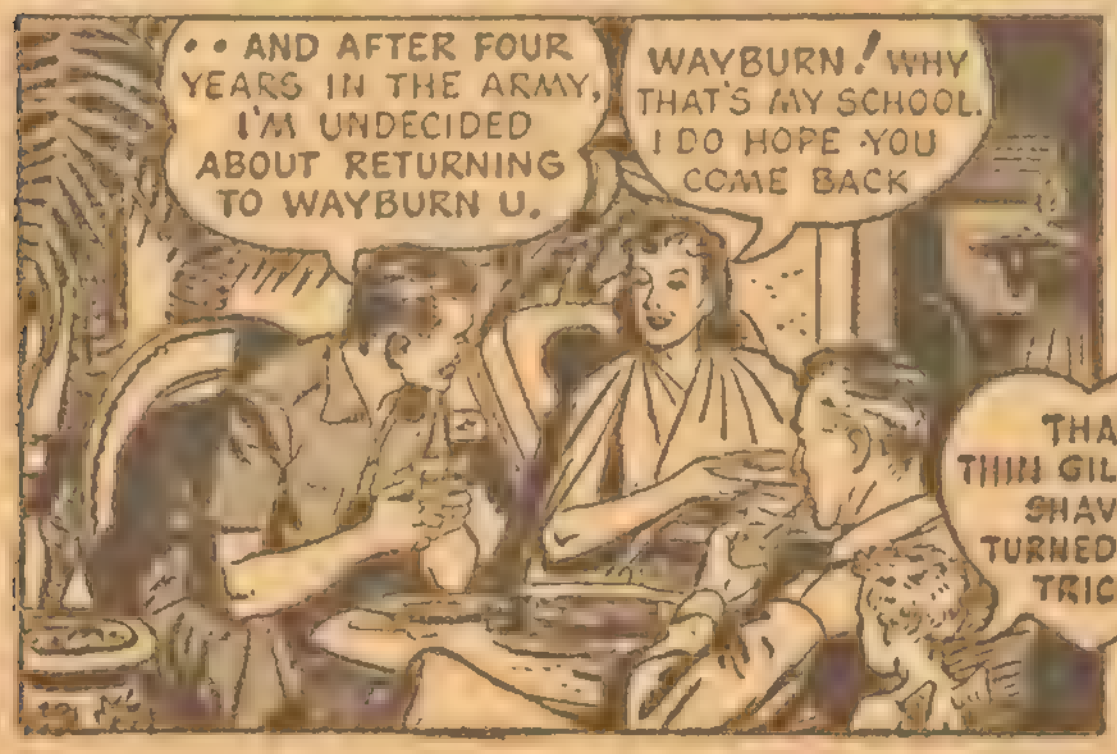
EQUIPPED WITH FACE-MASK AND SPRING DRIVEN HARPOON, SUE DRISCOLL HAD ENJOYED HER FIRST TRY AT FLORIDA "GOGGLE-FISHING" UNTIL HER FRANTIC QUARRY SNARLED THE HARPOON LINE, TRAPPING HER IN DEEP WATER




..AND AFTER FOUR YEARS IN THE ARMY, I'M UNDECIDED ABOUT RETURNING TO WAYBURN U.
WAYBURN! WHY THAT'S MY SCHOOL. I DO HOPE YOU COME BACK
THAT THIN GILLETTE SHAVE TURNED THE TRICK

FOR QUICK EASY SHAVES...GOOD-LOOKING AND REFRESHING...USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. ALSO THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T" AND PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE HARSH, IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTE BLADES
THE Gillette

Boyle's men were beating at the doors but leaped from the porch as they felt Ranger lead (CHAPTER V)

THE DEVIL'S MILL

By JACKSON COLE

When an evil schemer enslaves the wheat growers of the Panhandle country to further his dream of empire, Texas Ranger Hatfield roars into action with avenging guns!

CHAPTER I

The Mills Grind Death

THE NIGHT wind moaned over the flat Texas Panhandle. It had whirled from the west, across the mysterious Llano Estacado, the Staked Plain on which the Spanish padres and Coronado himself had trod in those ancient days when white men first saw the bright New World.

It swayed the fields of bearded wheat, making them rustle softly. The spikelets contained the most important cereal known to man, for, tiny as the individual grain might be, it had vast significance, for it was

life itself to human beings. Man might not live by bread alone, but physically he could. In value, wheat far surpassed gold or any coveted gem.

In a large building at the western edge of the settlement of Bordertown a fat man bulged from the armchair he occupied by an open window. It was late and most people were asleep, though saloons and other spots of like interest were running wild. Sounds of music, of raucous howls in both men's and women's voices penetrated to the spot where the fat man sat.

"I tell ye, Wagner, I don't want to sell the mill or any part of it!" a slender, elderly man who stood before the fat one was saying.

There was trouble in the man's blue eyes, and he kept licking his lips, glancing sideward at the tough, armed men who stood at his elbows. A pacing sentry passed the window, a wraith in the faint moonlight. There were other roughs, too, on guard, members of the corpulent Wagner's party.

Wagner's jowls rested on his flat celluloid collar. His oversized face gave him an owlish expression. His head was massive and his thin black hair was plastered down by pomade to the reddish scalp. His button nose and insolently lazy black eyes were lost in the florid flesh of his cheeks, but he had a protruding, ugly mouth, his thick lips hinting at his love of the fleshpots. His breathing was asthmatic.

His obese body was clad in a black broadcloth suit, and all his clothing was expensive and well-kept. A flowing black tie was on his slowly heaving chest, where diamond studs played with the yellow oil light. Pudgy hands rested on his thighs. He was so fat that each arm described a semi-circle at his side.

"What you want, MacLane," he said, "and what you are going to get, are entirely different matters. By now you must realize that what I wish is all-important."

Wagner's voice was deep and compelling. He was aware he had the situation in hand and was enjoying the anguish of the lean Scotsman, owner of the new roller mill.

"Ye can't do it!" cried MacLane. "I'll have the law on ye, Wagner!"

"I control more men than the scattered police, MacLane." The fat man shrugged. "Besides, before I undertook this, I went to the trouble of checking up. You're not even a citizen yet. You came here, ahead of your family, and you have no relatives in America. We'll see to any friends who may prove annoyin' to us. . . . Now use your head, man! Isn't it better to take me in as your partner, than to lose it all?"

MacLANE'S eyes narrowed. Wagner was secretly amused for he could read what MacLane had decided. The Scotchman meant to sign the agreements, and, once he got away from Wagner, he would complain to the authorities.

"Ver-ry well," snapped MacLane.

"Frye will show you where to sign," said Wagner.

"Curly" Frye, Wagner's chief lieutenant, stepped up. He was a stocky, brown-haired man of thirty, with damp, curly hair and a flat nose. His clothing was untidy.

"You're a clever fellow, MacLane," Wagner nodded, taking a long, slender Cuban cheroot from his breast pocket, and turning to light it with the taper beside the lamp. "Far as I know, this is the first steam roller mill in the States. It'll revolutionize flour production. You learned your business in the old country, but it was shrewd to bring your knowledge to this great virgin wheat district. A fortune in it, and a lot more, the way I'll handle it." He watched MacLane sign his name. "Good, good. Next, the deed to the mill—that's it. . . . I'm charmed by these contracts you signed with the local growers, so the crop will be brought to our elevators. . . . Splendid."

Wagner watched every move as Curly Frye's stubby forefinger indicated the places where MacLane must sign. The Scotchman was shaking as he straightened up, with the forced signatures on the documents. His face was red with rage at the cold rascality of Herman Wagner.

"May I go, sir?" he demanded.

Wagner blew forth a cloud of smoke, and using the lighted cheroot as a pointer, beckoned to a tall, slim fellow in the shadows.

"See to him, Sling," ordered the fat boss.

"Sling" Boyle moved with catlike tread. His silk shirt was a salmon hue, tucked into whipcord riding pants of latest cut. He

wore polished half-boots with extra high heels and silver spurs. On his pomaded hair reposed a fawn Stetson with a rattlesnake band, and his kerchief was striking. The twin Colts in his open holsters with filagreed silver inlays in the grips were handsome, for he was a fancy gunslinger. Boyle had a suave manner, was outstandingly good-looking, and women of a certain disposition adored him and his dandy's waxed mustache. His big blue eyes belied the devilish soul of him.

dashed for an open window. Boyle's gun ripped out before his startled oath, as he righted himself for the kill.

Wagner's foot then swiftly flicked out, tripping MacLane, and the mill owner went down heavily.

"No guns tonight!" snapped Wagner. The sleepy eyes had grown as round as glaring moons. His bulbous mouth was wet.

MacLane's cry of despair was jolted from him with his breath as Boyle landed in the small of his spine with sharp heels. Men

JIM HATFIELD

MacLane was afraid of Boyle. This strong-arm lieutenant of Wagner's was the man who had seized the mill owner and brought him in.

"Tell that patent-leather killer of yours to keep his paws off me, Wagner!" MacLane blurted.

And in that same instant the Scotchman realized he was to die.

The documents signed, he was only a menace to Wagner!

With a shrill cry, he ducked, butting his head into Boyle and bowling him aside as he

closed in, began beating the helpless Scotchman. The fat man got up, waddling over to participate in the sport, which seemed to give him intense pleasure.

When they had finished, Wagner took a long pin from his lapel and stuck it into several sensitive spots of the prone victim's body.

Sure that MacLane was dead, he spurned him with a polished boot toe.

"Don't let anybody see you dump him in the back street, boys," he ordered. "Turn his pockets inside out, so's it'll look like an

ordinary holdup. That's all till tomorrow. The mill's ours and so's the Panhandle."

* * * * *

THERE was no merrier soul than Steve Taylor, as a rule, but as he streaked after the mule-headed steers this day his young face was scarlet, and words hot enough to sear a stove-lid issued from his lips. He had spied the animals as they crashed a thin fence into the wheat fields, but instead of dropping their fool heads to graze on the succulent grain, they seemed determined to reach Memphis, which lay about seven hundred miles east.

The wheat was ripe. It brushed his legs as he rode, a rich, mellowing growth in the soil. Each of the twenty cattle left a visible trail marked by a swath of crushed grain.

"Cuss 'em, when they get an idea into their fool heads, it's no use," Taylor complained to Streak, his blue Arizona gelding with a white splash across his nose.

Streak bobbed his head in seeming agreement. He knew the ways of the cows he and his rider guarded. That rider knew that Streak was overtaking the runaways, but they had done damage, and already there had been trouble between Taylor's boss, Johnny Ort of the Dotted Circle, and the wheat growers on account of strayed cattle. The fence had been thrown up to turn them, but it did not always work.

"Don't know why they let farmers in this country," muttered Taylor.

He was a fine rider and cowhand who had wandered up from the Trans-Pecos that spring and gone to work for Ort. And he was recalling that the Dotted Circle owner had given his men orders to let the wheat growers strictly alone.

Slim of body, with good shoulders, Taylor had crisp light hair and blue eyes. His smooth face was pleasant, though he had a reckless look, youth's contempt for age's caution. He wore leather chaps over dark trousers, a blue shirt open at the throat, a gray Stetson large enough to serve as an umbrella, and the usual cartridge belt and holstered Colt .45-caliber revolver. His saddle was a good one, handsomely carved and with silver studs. He had worked a year to earn the money to pay for it.

Streak had nearly overtaken the fleeing cattle when young Taylor sighted the workers off to his left where the wheat was high and the land, though apparently flat as a table, had long, undulating waves in it. Men in overalls and straw hats, farm horses and machines, were engaged in reaping the grain.

"Now we're in for it!" Taylor thought.

The cows were almost upon the reapers when they hit stubble and could see the strange objects. They would have charged men afoot but the noise of the cutters, the unfamiliar bulks, proved too much for their dull intelligence. They swerved and ran south. Taylor pelted after them, leaving a trail in the wheat before he was able to head them west, toward Ort's range.

"Hey, you!"

One of the farmers was bawling at him, and Taylor, still hot under the collar, turned and rode over. The cows showed a stubborn intensity of purpose as they rushed in the new direction, and Taylor knew he could pick them up later.

A horse-drawn reaper was at work, and shocks were bound, ready for the threshers. Taylor's lip was curled as he pulled Streak up, for a cowboy didn't think much of a farmer.

"Well, what d'yuh want?" he demanded.

"Your cows do a lot of damage in the wheat," coldly said the big tall man who had hailed him.

He was a man of fifty, with strong limbs and stalwart frame which was clad in freshly washed overalls. His straw hat which shaded brown eyes covered thick brown hair in which there were grizzled areas, and he was smooth-shaven.

"I'm David Armstrong and this is my land," he said earnestly. "You must keep your animals out, for the machines can't cut grain that's been crushed down."

"You figger I chased 'em in here a-purpose?" asked Taylor sarcastically. "Why, cuss yuh, I busted a rib tryin' to head 'em out of yore blasted, all-fired wheat!"

He was aware of a couple of overalled figures just behind Armstrong, but his attention was all on glaring at the farmer in his irritation.

"We won't quarrel about it, my friend," said Armstrong, with maddening calm. "But tell John Ort he must strengthen his fences. This is the fifth time this season the cattle have got into my wheat."

"Well, if I was Ort, I'd come over and give yuh what yuh're askin' for," snapped Taylor. "What yuh hornin' in on cattle range for? I ought to paste yuh right where it'd do the most good, yuh no-good—uh—

The Ranger was ready for the attackers when they swept in (CHAPTER XI)

uh—" He choked on his oaths.

His ears felt like red windmills as he realized that one of his audience was a girl. She was wearing shirt, overalls and straw hat, like the men, and had been working with them, but even the shapeless, rough clothes could not hide her beauty. Her lovely face was pink from exertion, and reddish-gold curls escaped from under her hat. Large amber eyes widened, and full lips parted in astonishment as she stared up at the cowboy.

Horrified, Taylor quit swearing. He sought wildly for some excuse.

"Uh—sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean—didn't see yuh—I mean—"

Her eyes dropped, but returned to his. He thought she was amused.

"I'll tell Ort," muttered Taylor. "So long."

Pulling his reins, he beat a hasty retreat, stampeded by the girl's look.

He could feel them watching him though he wouldn't glance back.

"Made a jackass out of myself in front of that lady," he growled.

If both feet hadn't been in the stirrups, he could have kicked himself.

CHAPTER II

Surprise Raid

STEVE TAYLOR worked the steers through the gap and made a temporary repair to the fence, until men could come out with hammer, nails and new posts. Then he headed for Ort's.

The Dotted Circle controlled the upper reaches of Borden River, which eventually ran into a tributary of the Brazos. The ranchhouse, with bunkhouse, stables and corrals, stood within sight of the escarpment of the Staked Plain. Ort's wife and daughters had planted trees in the yard, but they were not yet large.

A Panhandle rancher, Johnny Ort was a good fellow, stocky of build, easy to get along with. As Taylor rode up, dismounted and described what had happened in the wheat fields, Ort stood, slouched in his work clothes and weathered hat, a cud of tobacco bulging a leathery cheek, listening soberly.

"Well, yuh couldn't help it, Steve," he said, at the end of the recital. "Been meanin' to run another strand of wire and stick in more posts over there. Cussed farmers are pests. Things have changed since I was young as you. The range is gettin' powerful crowded. I'll send Armstrong a beef to shut him up."

Ort was no fire-eater. He had an even disposition, buttressed by forty years of struggle with nature's vagaries such as drought, wind and temperature. Life with four daughters, and a loving though shrill-voiced wife who firmly believed a husband should toe the mark, had cinched it.

No liquor was permitted at the Dotted Circle, for Mrs. Ort was a member of a temperance society which believed a man should be a teetotaller, so the boys indulged only when in town, or from smuggled stores. Ort usually had a flask hidden in the bunkhouse, whose precincts were sacred to the men about the place. The boss enjoyed a nip occasionally but afterwards he had to chew wild mint to baffle his wife.

The range would support just so many cattle, on the bunches of curling buffalo grass. Ort hired a dozen hands in season to care for them.

"I'll run that steer over tonight, Boss," Taylor offered.

"Go to it. Yuh can make it before dark and it'll keep Armstrong from simmerin' to a bile, mebbe. I'll have the missus save yuh a plate, in case they don't feed yuh over there."

Taylor shaved and washed up at the trough. He put on a clean shirt and his best silk kerchief, a blue one with large white polka dots. He wet his crisp hair and tried for a part in the middle but it was no go. He had to be content with sweeping it back.

The boys were coming in, and as he was finishing his careful toilet, Eddie Pope, Taylor's best friend, came into the bunkhouse.

"Wow!" cried Pope, immediately falling flat on the floor. "When'd the Queen of Sheba come to Texas?"

"Just cleanin' up, that's all," growled Taylor.

Pope rose, blinking. He scratched his head. He was a good-looking young man and, according to his own way of looking at it, a dangerous lady-killer.

"Where yuh bound?" he demanded. "Can I come? Has she got a sister?"

"Shucks," grumbled Taylor. "I'm only goin' to run a beef over to Armstrong's, Eddie. Don't act like more of a donkey than yuh have to."

"Oh!" There was a world of understanding in Pope's brief exclamation. "'T won't do yuh any good. I seen that strawberry blonde in Bordentown and she don't cotton to cowboys and won't talk to fellers unless they're interduced proper." He made an elegant bow from the waist, mincing in his best manner. "'Oh, Lady Vere de Vere, may I persent Count Deluxy Taylor.' 'Chawmed, I'm suah.' 'May I hawv the next dawnce, yore ladyship?' 'By all means, let us prawnce.'"

Solemnly, Eddie Pope took a phantom lady by the wasp waist and began to pirouette, but the disgusted Taylor stalked out.

Steve Taylor's mount, Streak, was always in the best of condition, but the cowboy gave him extra brushing and put on his handsomely decorated bridle. When all was in readiness he rode east, and sighting a bunch of cows, picked out the best one. Streak easily controlled the steer's vagaries, and without mishap they reached a dirt road, fenced by wire from wheat fields. It led to Bordentown but Armstrong's lane branched off north some miles west of the settlement. Taylor ran the beef to the buildings which were set above high-water mark on the river bank.

There was a large barn, rail fences, a building that somewhat resembled a barracks, and a house built of native timber which had shrunk in the hot sun. It was different from a ranch. There were farm tools and domesticated animals here, and the cows gave milk, and were tame and fat. Box-wagons, used to transport threshed grain, a hay kicker, mowers and such stood around.

It was near dark when Taylor rode up.

"Armstrong!" he sang out.

FROM the kitchen came cook smoke and appetizing odors of a meal being prepared. Dave Armstrong issued from the big barn. He put down the pail he was carrying and slowly walked over to Steve.

"Howdy, suh," said Taylor. "Ort sent yuh this steer. Where yuh want him?"

"Oh—wasn't necessary," said Armstrong. "Wish he'd fix that fence, though. Mighty nice of yore boss to do this." Armstrong had no gun on, and Taylor felt uncomfortable and suddenly transparent under the gaze of the man's steady brown eyes, as though Armstrong could tell just why he had come to the farm.

"Brought the cow over myself," he said, "for I wanted to say I was sorry for the way I talked today, Armstrong. Didn't savvy there was a lady listenin'."

"That's all right," Armstrong said, in his cool, detached manner.

Taylor placed the bawling steer in a small pen the farmer indicated. There were hands about, but they were not cowboys. They were transient workers who moved from Texas to the Canadian border as the wheat ripened. They camped in the barracks, and had their own cook. They knew nothing of the use of the cowboy's fighting weapon, had no experience with such, and had none of the waddy's code loyalty toward those who hired them.

"Well, if that's all, Armstrong, I'll be ridin'," said Taylor at last, uneasy at the farmer's silent scrutiny.

Armstrong nodded. "Thanks," he said again.

Taylor had turned Streak when a woman called from an open kitchen window, "Pa! Ask the young man to stay for supper."

Taylor ate with the family in the kitchen, with Florrie Armstrong at his side. Armstrong, his wife Dolly, and two sons who were younger than Florrie, were at the table.

Mrs. Armstrong was more friendly toward Taylor than was her husband. She was a pleasantly plump woman with coppery hair like her pretty daughter's. She kept up the conversation with determination, asking Taylor about his parents, and his boyhood in south Texas.

Florrie fascinated Steve Taylor, and he tried to keep from staring at her all the time. She had changed into a fresh blue dress, a blue ribbon bound her thick hair and she wore leather slippers.

Dark had come soon after supper was over, and the moon was rising. Taylor sat on the front porch, in the shadow away from the open doorway, and Florrie was in a rocking-chair. He had already apologized a dozen times for that afternoon, but started again.

"It's all right," she said, and when she smiled, Taylor went light-headed.

"Reckon yore dad don't care for cowboys, does he?" he asked.

"He hasn't known too many," Florrie said primly. "He thinks they're rough."

"Do you?"

She smiled again and gave a little shake of her head. Then she looked up in surprise as men rode into the yard, half a dozen of

them, and dismounted. One held the horses, while the others hurried to the porch.

"Armstrong!" shouted a gruff voice, and David Armstrong came out.

"Oh—it's you, Wagner!" the farmer said coldly.

He did not ask the man in, but Wagner, a prodigiously fat man, breathing heavily, waddled across the veranda. He was trailed by a slim dandy, with a crisp black mustache and wearing pearl-handled six-guns. Taylor, with a shock, recognized Sling Boyle, who had a bad reputation in the Panhandle. The others were young toughs, big-hatted, hard-eyed, and armed.

Wagner pushed inside the house, with Boyle following. One of the other men took the open doorway. Inside voices were raised, and with doors and windows open, Taylor could not help overhearing.

"Armstrong," he heard the booming voice of the fat Wagner say, "you signed contracts for your entire crop and so have your friends. The MM Milling Company is mine, and I know what you're up to. You're tryin' to talk your neighbors into fightin' me. I won't stand for it! This is the last warnin' I'll give you."

Wagner's deep voice was menacing. His tone, the whole setup, angered Steve Taylor.

"Who's that fat hombre, Florrie?" he asked. "I know Boyle, but I never saw that big windbag before."

"Sh!" The girl's hand, touching his arm in warning, was trembling.

"Your price is sheer robbery, Wagner," said Armstrong. "You're cheatin' us growers. MacLane was an honest man, but you have other ideas."

Through the window, Taylor saw Wagner shaking his fist in the wheat farmer's face.

"You're a trouble maker, Armstrong! I'll fix you."

Sling Boyle glided in, and since Armstrong had no gun, it was a dangerous moment.

Taylor had stood all he could. He leaped up and vaulted through the open window, Colt in hand. His sudden entry threw them off. They hadn't expected gun opposition at the farm.

"Get out of here!" snarled Taylor, back to the wall. "I'll make sieves of yuh if yuh bother Armstrong, savvy?"

THEY couldn't get at him without making a frontal attack and the leaders did not like his steady Colt. Wagner scowled at him.

"You're makin' a mistake, cowboy. We'll go—now. But you've only made it worse."

"Dry up and waddle, fatty," snapped Taylor.

"You'll hear from me again, Armstrong," warned Wagner. "This two-bit cow nurse can't help you. Remember what I told you."

Wagner waddled out. Sling Boyle, his face scarlet with wrath, followed with his men. They mounted and rode off.

Steve Taylor grinned at the farmer.

"That's the way to handle such scum, Armstrong. They got a nerve, comin' and talkin' thataway on yore own ground!"

Armstrong sat down. He was chalky under his tan.

Taylor rejoined Florrie.

"Father hates gunplay," she whispered. "I do, too—but I think you were wonderful!"

A glow spread over Steve Taylor.

"Don't savvy what the war's about," he said, "but Sling Boyle's a sidewinder and that Wagner's worse!"

"It's the price Wagner's offering for our wheat," said Florrie. "He's taken over the roller mill and contracts the growers signed with MacLane, who was killed a few days ago. Wagner says we must take what he says, and we can't deal elsewhere, but it's wrong. He's bad! I'm afraid he'll hurt my father."

Dave Armstrong was a gentle, but firm soul, as Taylor could plainly see. He knew, too, that the wheat men were not gunfighters, and realized that Armstrong hated such crude force.

Riding home, Taylor thought of all that, and of Florrie, of the problems posed for her people by Wagner and his gang. . . .

Two evenings later, hungry for a sight of Florrie, Taylor was turning up the lane that led to the Armstrong place when he heard gunshots and shouts at the farm. Women were screaming.

"Let's go, Streak!" he urged, and set off at a gallop.

Armed men were on the porch when Taylor rode up, and he realized they were beating the victims they had thrown down. There were riders about, and milling figures in the lighted living room. Jeering gunnies swarmed over the place, their weapons cowing the field hands. Steve Taylor saw Sling Boyle directing the raid, as toughs kicked and punched their prey.

Drawing his Colt, Taylor headed for the fray, but he was helpless against so many.

He nearly lost his own life as outside guards turned on him, their blasting lead splitting the air. He pinked two of them he spotted against the light, but the others ran him off, chasing him into the wheat across the river.

It was not until midnight that he could circle and approach the farm, finally quiet after the attackers left. When he reached the house he found Armstrong lying on a couch, his wife hovering over him. The farmer's face was a swollen, bloody mess, for he had been terribly beaten.

The angry Taylor learned then that several wheat growers had met at Armstrong's to discuss ways and means of fighting Wagner's power. The raiders had surprised them, and all of the defiant farmers had been cruelly hurt.

CHPTER III

Bordentown

CAPTAIN WILLIAM McDOWELL, head of the Texas Rangers, was, in these latter days of his life, confined by the four walls of his Austin headquarters office. That is, he was physically held there because of infirmities that come with age, but his spirit could still soar with the eagle.

In fancy he sped through the air from the lush semi-tropical Gulf coast to the arid plateau of the Trans-Pecos in breath-taking instants; or over the snow-capped mountains; or from the Rio Grande to the Red River. He was even able to reach the far-off Panhandle, which was what was bothering him most at the moment.

He was studying reports, complaints that had been filtering in from that distant land, part of Texas as yet so far removed from the nerve centers at Austin that it seemed as far away as Timbuctoo.

"Wheat—flour—steam roller mill!" he was muttering. "Feller killed—farmers beat up. But not by cowmen, like you might think, over a natural argument."

He scratched his white head, rose, grunting at the sudden twinge of rheumatic pain in his knotty old legs. Going to the map of the state tacked to the wall, he studied the section, a gnarled finger coming to rest on a black dot labeled Bordentown.

McDowell's manner was suddenly calm as

Hatfield hastily put a slug through the killer in the doorway (CHAPTER IX)

he began studying this case from a detached, impersonal point of view, for he was now behaving just as the doctor had ordered him to. For if his blood pressure jumped one notch higher, it would blow his toenails through the top of his skull—that was the impression the sawbones had given him, anyway.

"Well, well," he muttered. "Looks like a passel of smart coyotes up there are tryin' to prove we Rangers can't control things."

Few as they were, the Rangers were ultimately responsible for the general good behavior of vast Texas. News of a killing committed in El Paso, hundreds of miles away, or along the far reaches of the Red River, eventually reached Austin—and hit McDowell's sensitive soul. So to the old Ranger captain it was a personal affront when some double-dyed rascal stood up on his hind legs and howled.

"Dadglum it all!" he shouted, banging the wall with his fist so hard that a picture of Nelly, a favorite mare of long ago, fell to the floor. "Like to get up there and see to 'em myself, cuss their hides! Ticklish proposition, the Panhandle!"

"Cap'n, Cap'n," a sorrowful voice admonished from the hall. "You savvy very well that before they cut yuh loose from bed yuh promised yuh'd behave!" It was McDowell's harried clerk.

"Call Jim Hatfield, then, before I git excited," snapped the old man.

"All right—all right. But quit bustin' the floor up."

When Hatfield, McDowell's star Ranger, came into the office, the Captain felt calmer, almost as good as though he were able to leap on his horse and ride as in the good old days.

Hatfield had that effect on men. Cool of manner, and tall—well over six feet—the Ranger was bronzed by sun and wind. His rugged features gave only a hint of his terrific power in action. He had wide shoulders, and his lean body tapered to slim hips where his Colts were buckled. But in that body was a fighting panther's lithe strength and his heart beat with steady, unflinching courage.

"Yes, suh, Captain," he said in a quiet, drawling voice, as he saluted.

"Set down. Got a nasty mess to clear up in the Panhandle."

Under the Ranger's wide Stetson was gleaming jet-black hair. His eyes were gray-green, and a wide mouth gave him a good-natured look—in repose. But McDowell knew with what lightning power this tall officer could strike when necessary, and the speed and skill of his guns.

The Captain was also aware of Hatfield's genius in analyzing a situation, of his strategic and tactical abilities in a fight. Sometimes outlaws banded together, under the guidance of an evilly clever mind, but always in Hatfield they had found a mind still more clever, to ferret them out.

"You savvy how it is in the Panhandle," said McDowell. "Lot of folks up there figger they're too far off from the heart of things to be taken care of by us. Been talk, even, of formin' a new state out of the section. I wouldn't hanker to see Texas split." McDowell's old eyes were stern.

HATFIELD waited for the gist of the case. Whatever it was, he would be ready for it. For his work, the lawman's dangerous existence he led, was everything to him. He was never so happy as when on a perilous mission.

"Mill owner named MacLane was killed," the Captain informed. "The local marshal says it was done by toughs who robbed him. I'd take that as it stands, only that this MacLane who was killed owned the MM Millin' Company, which has been taken over by others, and complaints about the new owners are bein' voiced by the wheat growers in the district. Sounds like strong-arm stuff to me, from where I sit, savvy? This is only what I've worked out, settin' here dreamin'."

Hatfield tabulated everything in his mind, aware that McDowell could smell skunk a long way off. Straws in the wind which to the average person meant little or nothing, to the Captain were unerring signals.

"Here's a letter come in from one David Armstrong," McDowell went on. "He claims he was a victim of hoodlums who beat him up account of a dispute over marketin'. He seems to have a lot of savvy. Mentions an hombre named Wagner, and a gunslinger tagged Boyle, and some more. Look it over."

The Ranger read the complaint, and looked up.

"These wheat growers class as farmers," McDowell said, "but they're good citizens for the most part, entitled to the same protection any Texan gets from the Rangers. Wheat's a new crop up there but from what I understand, the Panhandle's a bread basket

big enough to feed the country. The more folks around, the bigger market for cows, and a man likes bread to sop up his gravy! Above all, we got to prove to the Panhandle that the Rangers' long arm can protect 'em."

After gleaning all the details at McDowell's command, Hatfield rose, saluted, and strode out into the sunlight. Shaded by the adobe wall stood a beautiful golden gelding, sleek of coat, with brushed mane and tail. It was Goldy, Hatfield's warhorse and prized comrade of the trails.

A Winchester rode snugged in its leather boot and he carried equipment and iron rations in his saddle-packs. His voice soothed Goldy as he mounted, and turned to wave farewell to old McDowell, who stood in the office window.

"Tough as I used to be," mused the Captain, "if I'd been outlaw instead of officer, I'd hate to've tangled with Hatfield!"

Jim Hatfield made his usual speedy run from Austin to the Panhandle, with as few pauses to eat and sleep as possible. On his arrival in Bordentown his first action was to take care of Goldy. When the sorrel was in the cool of a shaded corral, Hatfield, as was his custom, headed for a saloon where he got into conversation with a bartender. He put some casual questions.

"Wheat?" repeated the barkeep, rubbing a wet spot with a damp cloth. "Why, yeah, they grow a good deal in these parts, stranger. But the MM Company down the street grinds most of it into flour. Another?" He indicated the Ranger's empty glass.

Jim Hatfield nodded, ringing money on the bar. Outside the Borden Hotel & Saloon, the Panhandle town baked in the ovenlike white heat. Bordentown was a growing settlement, with older structures on State Street, with a wide, bare plaza and newly built shacks on the dusty ways branching off it. There were stores, homes, a couple of livery stables, and several saloons, with the Borden House the largest and evidently longest established.

It was Hatfield's habit to enter a case without fanfare, and to work under an alias and innocent appearing guise, until he could gather the inside facts. His silver star on silver circle, hidden in a secret pocket of his shirt instead of gleaming on his vest, did not proclaim his calling to the curious and interested eyes of the evil men he sought. In his big hat, his fine whipcord riding breeches tucked into riding boots, a fresh blue shirt and red bandanna, he could pass anywhere as a Texas cattleman or tophand cowboy.

There were a couple dozen customers at the long bar which was backed by a polished mirror and rows of glasses, and more at the tables on the sawdust-covered floor, and in gaming rooms at the rear. A piano stood in one corner but it was too early and too hot for dancing.

"'Scuse me," the barkeeper chatted on. Such men were invaluable to the Ranger, for they always were founts of gossip and information. "But yo ain't got the cut of a farmer."

JIM HATFIELD gave the details the barkeeper was fishing, speaking so clearly that the men nearby could easily hear all he said.

"I'm a cattleman, from the Rio Grande. Name of Hald. Done right well and I heard tell of this wheat game. I figgered I'd try my hand at it for a change, just to see if I'm really as smart a coyote as I think I am."

He winked, and those within hearing grinned with him.

A couple of young cowboys stood down the bar, listening, and one turned to stare at the Ranger, until the cool gray-green eyes made the young fellow drop his own. They were nice looking cowhands, hardly more than boys, but were carrying men's weapons and looked to know their business. Hatfield would have hired either one if he had wanted a good hand with cattle. He could tell from looking at a man, usually.

The nearer one had crisp light hair and pleasant blue eyes, and was slender, with wide shoulders. The other was not as tall, and somewhat stockier. He had dark hair and a humorous expression in his eyes.

Hatfield glanced away from them to look out the big front windows. He could see a large, square building, with a high smokestack, one he had passed on his way in, and read the sign over the door. It was the steam-driven flour mill, the MM Company mentioned by the bartender.

"Yuh mean I can't buy no wheat in these parts, even if I was to go this MM bunch one better in price?" inquired the Ranger. "I'm a stubborn cuss, and when I set my mind to anything, I like to have my way."

"Well, I don't know," answered the bartender. "Yuh better ask them farmers, mister. Ain't my grain and ain't my mill,

either." He lowered his voice, so only the tall man heard. "Try Dave Armstrong. His farm's five mile west. Yuh can't miss it."

There was Armstrong again, the grower mentioned by McDowell!

CHAPTER IV

Threats

HATFIELD was deliberately strutting himself in the public eye, labeling himself, so that if anyone asked there would be an answer as to his business in town. On the way from Headquarters he had decided that he would pose as a wealthy cattleman who wished to take a gambler's fling in wheat.

The cowboys had been ragging and jesting with one another, and their voices lifted.

"Say, Steve," one of them was saying, "hear about the lady who asked the feller in the calaboose, 'What brought yuh here, my pore man?' and this hombre says; 'Six deputies, ma'am, and b'lieve me I give 'em some battle!' "

They were of an age to jostle one another, and laugh at their own jests. But the taller one, whose first name was Steve, as Jim Hatfield had gathered, kept glancing at the Ranger.

The blazing sun was growing larger as it reddened over the murky Staked Plain, far to the west. Hatfield, his thirst finally quenched and the seeds planted for his venture in the wheat game, repaired to the dining room of the hotel. A pretty waitress, attracted by his striking masculinity, hovered about him, serving him.

There were plenty of tables, but as Hatfield was eating, the two cowboys he had seen in the bar came in, and the taller one, Steve, leaving his friend at the doorway, came to the Ranger.

"Do yuh care if I set down here, mister?" he asked eagerly. "My name's Taylor. I ride for Johnny Ort, over at the Dotted Circle."

"Help yoreself," said Hatfield. "The country's a free one—I hope."

Taylor was an earnest young man for his years. His eyes had a worried look now.

"It's like this," he suddenly blurted. "I heard yuh tellin' the bartender yuh wanted to buy wheat. Well, yuh ought to talk to Dave Armstrong. He's a grower lives not far from here, on the west road."

"Armstrong again!" thought the Ranger. He feigned lukewarm interest. "Yuh say this farmer might sell me some wheat? I been hankerin' for a fling at it, like these here speculators the papers talk so much about. How do I get to his place?"

"I'll lead yuh, if yuh say the word. Ort's, where I work, lies past there, and me'n my pardner, Eddie Pope, will be ridin' right after supper."

"Bueno. Why not call yore pard and we'll eat together. I'll start over again, at the beginnin'."

Pope was introduced and sat down. He had a stock of jokes, and the three young men were quickly friends. When Pope heard they were going to stop at Armstrong's, he winked at the Ranger.

"Mebbe yuh wonder how come a no-good waddy like Steve is so interested in wheat," he drawled. "It ain't that kind of flour that's really got him. It's another sort—a bloomin' strawberry blonde, Armstrong's daughter. Her old man don't like cowpunchers, and yuh can't blame him, with Steve the specimen he's up against. Been tellin' Steve he'll get wiped out if he ain't . . . Uh, nice day, ain't it?"

Under the table, Taylor had given Pope a violent kick on the shin, just above the boot-top, and Hatfield did not miss the play. The cowboy had warned his friend to shut up, and Pope had quickly changed the subject.

Dark was at hand when the three men picked up their horses and rode out of Bordentown, taking a dirt road which led westward. Stars were out, and the moon showed on the horizon, as they left the town behind, picking up speed on the stretch.

"There's somebody ahead of us, boys," said the Ranger suddenly. He could sniff the dust over the road.

"Yuh're right," agreed Taylor. "But the road's traveled regular, Hald."

Hatfield was inclined to be wary. In his profession he had to be, in order to keep on breathing. The amount of dust made him conclude that it was a large party, perhaps half an hour ahead of them.

He had worked in other sections of the great Panhandle, but Bordentown and its environs were unfamiliar to him. Besides, he was certain that Steve Taylor was holding something back from him. Decent as

the two waddies seemed, they might be leading him into a mess.

POPE was riding slightly to his rear, with Taylor on his right. Just to check, Hatfield slowed, so that Pope came up and passed him on the other side, then pulled his reins to keep from running away. If they had been meaning to take him, Pope would have tried to maintain a position at his back.

"Want yuh to talk to Armstrong, Hald," said Taylor earnestly. "He's a fine feller, even if he is a farmer. And him and the other wheat growers are lookin' for a market."

"That bartender says that MM flour mill has 'em sewed up," reminded Hatfield.

"Yeah, but it ain't right. . . Well, you talk to Dave first."

"What yuh holdin' back from me, Steve?" demanded Hatfield.

That took Taylor by surprise and for a time he didn't reply.

"Well," he finally said, "what the barkeeper said is so. The MM has the growers hog-tied. It's a cryin' shame, too. You don't look like the kind of feller who scares easy."

"Never mind the butter. I can eat my bread dry. It's dangerous, ain't it, foolin' with wheat in these parts?"

"Yuh ain't goin' back, are yuh?" Steve asked earnestly.

"Not if there's a chance to get my hooks into some of that wheat," Hatfield said firmly. "Fact is, I sort of enjoy a good, honest scrap."

"This is a good 'un," Eddie Pope remarked carefully, "but I wouldn't call it honest, mister."

"I'll do the talkin', Eddie," snapped Taylor. "Looka here, Hald. Armstrong's decent and straight and so are his friends. The MM used to be, till its first owner, a feller by the handle of MacLane, was killed. The mill was took over by an hombre named Herman Wagner. Wagner's a fat, dirty rascal, and he has some gunnies who have been makin' life miserable for the growers."

"H'm. Sounds interestin'."

"You won't back out, then?" cried Taylor.

"Not till I see what's what. Go on. Yuh can't scare me easy. How many killers has this Wagner got?"

"Oh, twenty or thirty. A slick named Sling Boyle bosses 'em."

"Twenty or thirty!" exclaimed Pope. "Say, yuh can count higher'n that when it's cows, Steve!"

"All right. Wagner and Boyle hire plenty. But I ain't afraid of such scum."

"Let's not go quite so fast," said the Ranger. "The dust's fresher and thicker."

Taylor was uneasy. "I didn't see 'em leave town, but a gang might have been at Curly Frye's and got on the road before we passed."

"How far to Armstrong's—and who's Frye?" asked Hatfield.

"'Bout another ten minutes. And Frye's mill manager for Wagner."

As they came near the wheat farm, they could see the house lights. On both sides were fields of ripe, waving grain.

Hatfield was alert. There was the chance that the riders were enemies. He grew almost certain when, on reaching the turnoff, there was no dust on the highway.

"That gang's gone up the lane to the farm, Taylor," he said uneasily. "We better—"

A gunshot, then a volley, and wolfish howls rang out in the darkness.

"Hold it, Taylor!" ordered the Ranger as the cowboy lifted his quirt to spurt forward. "They'll have the lane covered or they're

[*Turn page*]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

bigger fools than I think. Let's go round through the wheat."

"All right. Come on, Eddie! They're after Dave Armstrong again!"

Taylor knew the ground. There was a gate not far away and he headed for it and opened it. The trio rode through into the high, rustling wheat, and crossing the river, made for the scrub growth near the farm. They could hear shots and yells, and Taylor was in a sweat.

COMING in from the north end, behind the house, they could see riders circling in the yard, shooting at windows, but the Armstrongs had bolted the doors. Slowing down to take stock of the situation, Hatfield and his two companions saw many enemy figures. Some were on the porch, banging on the door with a heavy log they had picked up.

"Come out, Armstrong, or we'll burn the house down!" howled a furious voice.

"That's Sling Boyle!" growled Taylor. "Cuss 'em, they'll really give it to Armstrong tonight. He's been tryin' to organize all his friends against 'em. They beat him up once, and he's still sick from it. This time, they'll cripple him for fair!"

The three young men pulled up, to check. The Ranger was a natural leader and already Taylor and Pope looked to him.

"Wonder why they don't open fire from the winders," said Hatfield.

"Armstrong can't handle guns," Taylor said, with a heavy sigh. "And anyways, he don't believe in usin' 'em. So far they ain't killed any of his pards, so Armstrong insists they're better off than tryin' to shoot it out with trained marksmen, savvy?"

Taylor explained as best he could, though it was hard for him to understand Armstrong's view.

"He's mighty stubborn about doin' things legal-like and peaceful," he went on, "but yuh got to admire him, for he's the best-hearted feller alive and he'll stand up for his rights without even a club in his hand!"

CHAPTER V

Brush

THE immediate problem of running off Boyle's gunnies occupied the Ranger. He understood the ruffian type that throve on the Border, and knew that only better fighters, men of greater stamina, could crush such a gang. They had no sense of ethics or fairness, no pity.

And Armstrong was nearer right than Taylor seemed to think, for without proper arms and men who knew how to use them, without a field general to direct the forces, this attack might result in a terrible massacre of decent men, before help could come!

Several bolder spirits among the field hands rushed from the barracks, carrying pitchforks and clubs. But a group of Boyle's gunnies charged, sending lead close over them. Heavy mustangs threatened to run them down. The singing slugs, and their own helplessness against the trained might of Wagner's forces, split the workers and they fled in all directions.

"They've already got most of Armstrong's friends buffaloed, and lined up," Taylor said mournfully. "Threatened their families as well as the growers. County sheriff rode over, when Armstrong complained about the raid, but he ain't done anything."

"Aw, the sheriff's an old fool and he's scared of Boyle," growled Eddie Pope. "What say we start shootin'?"

"Wait'll we get in position," said Hatfield. "Pope, you ride around and come in from the left. Taylor, take the right. I'll head straight at 'em. But make a lot of noise. Give the Rebel yell and make it sound like we was comin' with an army, savvy?"

Guns out, the three separated. And when the Ranger had given the other two a few minutes to get into position, he opened the ball. The shrill Rebel yell he gave rose on the night air. Over to the left, Eddie Pope whooped in reply, and then Taylor let go. Hatfield, going full-tilt, swept in toward the veranda. He worked his carbine, shooting fast.

"Come on, boys—in and at 'em!" he shouted. "Fetch in them wings, fellers!"

Slashing bullets swept the porch, where Boyle's men were beating in the door. Bunched together, they felt the tearing Ranger lead, and leaped apart, diving from the porch—all save one, who lay where he had fallen. Taylor and Pope were coming, sounding like a battalion as they yelled, their Colts roaring.

Across the yard, a mustang fell, throwing his gunny rider hard. Pope was charging, and his bullets cut two more of Boyle's

horsemen, sitting ducks in the light from the house. But there were many gunnies about the place, so many that they could wipe out three attackers if they made a determined effort.

The Ranger had a voice which could reach over the clash of battle when he desired, and he had approached upwind so his cries could easily be heard. At the psychological moment, as the enemy turned to see what forces had struck, Hatfield's stentorian command roared out:

"Hustle, don't let one man escape! Bring them wings up—faster, surround 'em! Don't give 'em a chance to run!"

A couple of riders near the lane turned stealthily and rode away in the night. Several others, seeing them go, followed, headed for the road to town. Pope, Taylor and the Ranger were still emptying and reloading their revolvers, firing steadily, never letting up with the shrill Rebel yell.

Sling Boyle was cursing, but unable to hold his retreating hirelings. He was swept along in the sudden panic which the Ranger had shrewdly started. Hatfield had convinced them that a large force was coming into position to capture them all.

Once out of control, they were no longer a mob, but fleeing individuals, each set on saving his own neck. Hatfield let them go, content with having got them in motion and away from the farm. Taylor, Pope and the Ranger made a great racket, feinting at pursuit. But when the gunnies were on the highway at a dead run, the defenders of the farm turned back to Armstrong's.

Steve Taylor was delighted, and so was Eddie Pope. Taylor kept slapping his leather-covered thigh and laughing.

"That was swell, Hald, the purtiest, neatest trick I ever hope to see! It was ten to one, but we run 'em like so many rabbits!"

The cowboys were inclined to crow over the easy victory, but the Ranger, chinstrap drawing up his strong jaws, had a grim look.

ON THE porch lay a dead gunny, one of Boyle's killers. Taylor knew him by sight. There was another one in the yard, where a mustang also was breathing its last. The wounded had ridden away, either under their own steam or aided by friends.

"Pope, stick out by the lane and make shore they don't come back while we're inside," ordered the Ranger. "Taylor, you come in and introduce me to Armstrong."

Steve Taylor sang out to those inside the house, and when he had identified himself, telling them that the attackers were gone, the door was opened. Taylor led the tall man into the main room which was lit by an oil lamp on the round center table.

Hatfield glanced about. The place was comfortably furnished, with a rug on the floor, chairs, a couch, and pictures on the walls. White, hand-sewn curtains hung at the clean windows. There were books and papers around, and other belongings of a cozy home.

A plump woman with coppery hair, an anxious look on her face, stood by the chair in which a big man sat, his lips drawn. There were marks on his stern face, and he was in a dressing-gown. Under the tan he had acquired from his work in the fields he looked pale, half-ill. A girl of perhaps twenty, a beautiful girl with her mother's lovely hair, and amber eyes, stepped forward. In the background were two lads, one perhaps fourteen, the other a couple of years older.

"It was you who drove them off, Steve?" the man asked the cowboy.

"Yeah, Pope and me and this big feller—mostly him," answered Taylor. "We downed a couple and fanned the rest."

"You—killed two men?"

"Dead as Hector."

"I—I'm sorry."

The man in the armchair dropped his head. He had a strong body, thick brown hair with grizzled patches in it. His eyes were sorrowful.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Taylor was somewhat in awe of David Armstrong because the farmer was Florrie's father. But the wheat grower had a quality of determination which the cowpuncher had to admire, even if he himself did not approve of pacifism. Armstrong did not fear pain or death any more than the best of men did, but he was violently opposed to bloodshed.

"Introduce me, Steve," directed the Ranger softly.

"Oh, yeah. This here is Mr. Jim Hald, folks. He's a cowman, but he's interested in buyin' wheat so I fetched him here. Bumped into that gang when we rode up. . . Dave Armstrong, Mrs. Armstrong, Miss Florrie, and young Dave and Jules."

Having done the honors, Taylor mopped his brow and went over to Florrie, while Hatfield pulled up a chair beside Armstrong's.

"Yuh can lay all this to me," he began. "After all, we had to defend our hides when we run into them gunnies. Now, Taylor says yuh've been tryin' to bust off with Wagner's MM Mill, because he's cheatin' yuh. I'd like to get a clear idea of what's goin' on here."

Armstrong nodded. He had not fully recovered from the terrible beating he had received at the hands of Boyle's ruffians, and was much shaken by the recent events.

"The mill was built by a man named MacLane, a fair dealer," he said. "It's the first steam-driven roller mill in the district. We had agreements with MacLane's firm to deliver our entire wheat crop—that is, myself and the other growers. MacLane was killed, and Wagner took over. He dropped the price. We were threatened, if we tried to sell elsewhere. I've tried to get my friends together, to fight Wagner, but—well, I've been beaten and some other growers have been, too. Most of 'em are afraid, now, because harm to their wives and children has been threatened. It's a terrible thing."

"Sounds like it," agreed the Ranger. "Just the same, I'm interested. I'll buy yore wheat, Armstrong, or at least I'll broker it."

"How much will you pay?"

Armstrong liked the big man, as most people did. The Ranger had a strength of soul, yet a gentle manner with decent folk.

UNACQUAINTED as yet with the wheat game, Hatfield backed and filled. Then he asked cagily:

"Well, what's Wagner offer?"

"Only twenty cents a bushel!" replied Armstrong bitterly. "We can't make enough to pay our debts at that figure. It's less than half the present market price."

"I'll guarantee yuh get the market price," said the Ranger at once.

Armstrong shook his head. "It's not so easy as you seem to think, sir. Wagner won't let you deal in wheat here. Any attempt to deliver the grain would mean attack, the box-wagons would be seized and the loads confiscated. That's been threatened. Otherwise, we might transport our wheat to the railroad by wagon, and either ship it or dispose of it. It's a long haul, but it would be better than Wagner.

"You see, when MacLane set up the new mill, we signed agreements with him gladly, for the flour could be taken to market more cheaply than the whole grain. Then, MacLane assumed the risk. Wagner is using those contracts as a pretext to make us deal with him at his own price. We've complained, but nothing's been done to relieve us. And as I told you, Wagner's methods have frightened my friends."

Hatfield listened, taking it all in. The situation was complicated, with the wheat growing, milling, and various costs coming into the picture. He knew the cow business backward and forward, he knew mining and other frontier pusuits, but flour milling was something to challenge his ability.

"Tell yuh what, Armstrong," he finally said. "Set tight and I'll see what's what. Sort of interests me, the way Wagner's runnin' things in these parts. But don't let that bother yuh. Keep quiet till I tweak Wagner's jowls, savvy?"

"Look out you don't get your own hand bit," warned the grower.

"Let me give you some supper, sir," Dolly Armstrong said.

"Thanks amighty, ma'am, but we had grub in town. I'll be movin'. Don't reckon them rascals'll be back tonight, and I'll keep an eye peeled for 'em from now on."

"We're very grateful to you," she said, "for trying to help us."

"That's all right, ma'am."

He shook hands with Armstrong, and glanced around for Taylor.

"Steve's outside with Florrie," said Mrs. Armstrong.

"I'll pick him up on my way. Adios."

Hatfield went onto the porch with his quiet tread but did not immediately see Taylor. Then he heard the cowboy's pleading voice off to his right.

"Florrie, please say yes! You know how I feel. I'll do anything for you."

"I know, Steve," came the girl's soft voice. "I—I feel the same way, about you. But father's sick, and I can't leave him. He's so worried. He's set against me marrying any cowboy, though he does like you as much as any."

The Ranger began whistling "Buffalo Gals" in a shrill key, and Taylor and Florrie stopped talking. The waddy took his leave of the girl, following the tall officer. They picked up their horses, and Eddie Pope was waiting where the lane entered the highway.

"You boys headin' for home?" asked the Ranger.

"Meant to," answered Taylor, "but if you need us, we'll be glad to stick."

"Figgered I might go with yuh, tonight," said Hatfield. "Reckon yore boss'll put me up?"

"Shore as it's hot below," Eddie Pope said heartily. "You bunk with us."

CHAPTER VI

Businessman

DECIDING to take the west branch, the three men rode in the moonlight, which tipped the soft-rustling wheat fields with lovely pale hues. When they had reached the limits of the farms, they paused before a gate which led them onto the Dotted Circle pastures, and made for the ranch. In the moonlit night they could see the black bulk of the Staked Plain escarpment west of Ort's.

Hatfield wanted to meet Johnny Ort. Entering a new territory, he needed to size up possible allies, and he also wanted to study the terrain as far as he could.

"Hope them wolves don't go back and hit Armstrong," Steve Taylor remarked anxiously.

"Ain't likely to, not tonight," the Ranger assured him. "They had a scare and they'll make town before they stop. That kind of customer always likes to have it easy in a scrap, and we fooled 'em into thinkin' a good-sized posse was after 'em. They'll want more men and they'll scout before they hit agin."

"Don't savvy why they don't drygulch Armstrong and be done with it," said Pope.

"I ain't too familiar with things yet," answered the Ranger, "but if Wagner wants wheat, he needs growers who'll take his price without a fight. Armstrong seems to be sort of a leader, and if Wagner can make him knuckle under, it'll cinch it. He won't kill Armstrong till he's tried everything else."

"That makes sense," Steve said, and nodded.

As they talked they had left the wheat fields behind and were in range country. But it was late when they reached the Dotted Circle, the buildings looming darkly in the silvery glow. Everybody had gone to bed a couple of hours ago, and the late arrivals talked quietly while they tended their horses, hung up their saddles, and repaired to the bunkhouse, where Taylor showed the Ranger an unoccupied bunk. Pulling off boots and hat, and unbuckling his cartridge belts, Hatfield lay down and was soon asleep. . . .

In the morning, the delicious aroma of coffee and frying foods made a pleasant awakening. Pope, Taylor, and the other waddies were leaving their bunks. They were all young fellows, full of jests and playful as puppies.

Hatfield was disappointed at the size of the spread, however. He had hoped that it might be larger, with more possible fighting men. Inquiry informed him that the next ranch lay fifty miles southeast, for the edge of the Staked Plain was arid and streams were few and far between.

Taylor introduced him to the boss. Ort was easy-going, stocky in build, a good fellow. That was plain to be seen by the cut of him. Ort was impressed by Hatfield's size.

"Yuh lookin' for a job?" he asked. "If so, I'll fire Taylor and Pope and yuh can take their places."

Hatfield winked at Steve Taylor. "Last place I was at, I sang a quartet all alone, Ort. But jokin' aside, I figgered I might ask for the loan of Steve and Eddie, if yuh ain't too rushed."

Ort blinked, looking up at the tall, rugged Ranger.

"It's up to them, far as I go. Things'll be slack next couple of weeks, so I can spare 'em."

"Thanks," said Hatfield. "I may need help gettin' settled."

Johnny Ort was too polite to ask pointed questions. But the Ranger knew he was curious about the stranger.

"I had a cow ranch down on the Rio Grande," he explained, "and done all right. Figgered I'd try somethin' different for a change, and got interested in wheat buyin'. It looks mighty excitin', the way they're runnin' it here."

Ort shrugged. "Farmers! They're a cussed pest."

"Yeah, I savvy how yuh feel. Used to figger the same way myself. But yuh got to remember they're good customers. They buy yore beef, and then, they're human bein's."

Ort was not entirely convinced of the latter, being a dyed-in-the-wool rancher. He had had too much fuss with the new settlers to love them.

"John! John-n-n!"

Mrs. Ort was calling her husband, and the stocky man hurried to obey.

BREAKFAST was ready. Hatfield ate with the boys in the shed, but the family ate in the kitchen. He learned that two of Ort's daughter were married to young men who worked there, and the other two were of school age.

Rested, and with a start at solving the knotty problem, Hatfield rolled a quirly after the warm meal and leaned on a corral fence, with Steve Taylor at his side.

"What next?" asked Taylor.

"Well, I'm saddlin' up in a few minutes, headin' for town," said Hatfield.

"Can Eddie and me come?" asked Steve eagerly.

"Yeah, but foller along an hour or so after me, savvy, and come in quiet-like. I'm settin' up as a wheat buyer and I aim to pinch Wagner where he's tender. . . ."

TWO days later, Jim Hatfield was established in Bordentown as a businessman. He had spent the first afternoon after his return to town in renting a small, vacant store not far from the Borden Hotel. It was built of cottonwood and the green lumber had shrunk in the sun. The unhappy brownish paint was peeling off.

The front window was a double one, giving a strategic view of State Street, the plaza, and the central part of town. There were two doors, the front one working with an old-fashioned string latch and it had a padlock hasp outside, a bolt inside. The smaller rear exit, giving out from the storage chamber behind, would allow anyone who so desired to escape by way of the stable yard and reach the next street. It was a point which the Ranger had not overlooked in choosing his office.

One wall was blank, another had one little window, dirty with cobwebs and dust, and Hatfield left it so. That would make it hard to shoot from outside at anyone sitting at the box desk he had bought at a grocery store.

Outside the doorway he had tacked up a white cardboard sign, with black letters which announced:

JAMES HALD, ESQ.
I BUY WHEAT AT MARKET. 48c. per bu.

He had visited all the bars and public gathering places to spread word of his arrival, and to inform the interested that he would be ready to purchase wheat by the next morning. At a nominal cost he had set himself up as a grain buyer.

There was a crude bunk in the other room, and anyway, he and the two cowboys could sleep on the floor—if Wagner permitted them to sleep. Near the back door stood a shed, which held the horses and saddles, and all in all, the Ranger was satisfied.

Now Hatfield lounged on a soapbox, several of which made handy seats in the office. He was awaiting customers, though the kind he was really interested in would be radically different from decent farmers.

The cool of early morning had long since passed, as the white-hot sun had come into its noon strength. Men stayed in the shade, as far as they could in the worst of the heat. Hatfield had eaten up the street at a restaurant, and was dozing, taking it easy. He figured he would have plenty to do later.

The late afternoon of this second day he had installed himself in the store wore along. Now and then Steve Taylor, who was hanging around in the back room, would glance in at his tall friend.

Horsemen, wagons, women and men shoppers, or others intent on their own affairs, began passing. Bordentown had spread out, and was a good-sized place. It was on the route north, too, into the Territory and west Kansas.

It was about four P.M. when Taylor stuck his head in the door and said quickly:

"Two of Sling Boyle's hombres just meandered into the back lane."

"Bueno," Hatfield said, nodding. "They're coverin' the back door. You keep out of sight. I reckon Boyle'll be along pronto."

He went over to glance from the big front window. Half a dozen men, in cowboy garb, wearing six-shooters and Stetsons, came rapidly down the wooden sidewalk, heels ringing on the dry boards. They stopped in a group, staring at the new sign. Then their leader, a slim young man with a good looking face adorned by a small waxed mustache, nodded. Three took up a stand before the store, and the dandy himself came inside, followed by two of his companions.

"Afternoon, suh," said the Ranger softly.

It was his first good look at Boyle, who was, according to Steve Taylor, chief gunslinger for Herman Wagner. Sling wore a clean lavender silk shirt. A most expensive Stetson was on his patent-leather head. His new pants were tucked into handsome boots with great Mexican silver spurs. The silver

inlay patterns in the grips of his big Colts glinted, for they were highly polished.

Boyle fixed the new businessman in Bordentown with a pair of innocent blue eyes. They were large eyes, although they had a somewhat staring, palish glint.

The men with him were not so well-clad as he, but wore leather, whipcord or other cowboy garb. However, all were armed, and all were intent, decidedly interested in the tall wheat buyer in their midst.

CHAPTER VII

Bait

IT WAS several seconds before Boyle said anything. He was busy sizing up the Ranger.

"H'm," he said then. "Yuh're J. Hald, Esq.? What's this here Esq., anyways?"

"Esquire stands for mister," Hatfield said loftily.

"I savvy," Boyle replied. "Well, Esq., I come to pow-wow with yuh."

Boyle had plenty of self-confidence. He kicked a soap-box around and sat down, leaning against the nearby wall. His men remained standing, one at either side of the exit.

"What can I do to make you happy, suh?" inquired Hatfield blandly. "Yuh got any chicken feed in yore pockets I can sell for yuh? That's my business, sellin' wheat."

Boyle frowned. There was a lightness, a challenging quality in this tall, imperturbable fellow's tone which put him at a disadvantage. He felt that the man was laughing at him and it ruffled his egotistical soul.

"That's why I'm here," he said shortly. "Yuh can't deal in wheat in these parts, for all the grain's contracted for. The MM Milling Company, down the way there, handles what the growers harvest. Thought I'd warn yuh that there's no use wastin' yore time."

Sling sniffed. He glanced down at his nails and pursed his lips to whistle, but made no sound, keeping time with a polished boot toe.

"Mighty sweet of yuh," answered Hatfield, "to go to such trouble on my account, suh. . . . I didn't see yore callin' card."

"Name's Boyle, Sling Boyle." The gunny looked up quickly to see if the tall man were impressed.

The Ranger's playful tone, the scarcely concealed jibe at Boyle's dandy looks, had angered the gunslinger. Hatfield knew it would. Such a man as Boyle would never have dared fix himself up in such a way, if he wasn't tough enough to carry it off. The fancy clothing, the airs, were only the outer shell, to hide the devil within.

"I tell yuh, yuh *can't* deal in wheat, for our mill takes the crop," insisted Boyle.

"I can try. S'pose I offer a better price than yore gang—'scuse me, yore organization."

Boyle jumped to his feet. He was furious, because in the word battle the Ranger had the upper hand, was unimpressed by Boyle's reputation, and quick at repartee.

"Dinny," he called, "take the gent's sign down for him. He won't need it no more."

One of his men reached out and tore off the cardboard from the tacks, tossing the sign into the gutter.

Hatfield had his back to the blank wall. Boyle stood in front of his men, at the door, half a dozen feet away.

"Yuh're lucky to git a warnin', savvy?" snapped the gunslinger. "By this time tomorrer you be on yore way, or yuh'll never leave here!"

"Now just a sec," begged Hatfield. "Look, I already contracted to buy a feller's wheat. See, it's in the book."

He held out a ledger, one he had purchased at the store the day before. Boyle came forward, scowling, but curious to see who had dared sign up.

"I'll—" he began.

With the terrific speed of which the Ranger was capable, he caught Boyle's extended arm and whipped the slim killer around, bending him down.

"Scum!" he growled. "I'll learn yuh manners!"

So swift was his play, so astonishing to the gang, that for instants they stared at the spectacle as the cursing Boyle struggled to free himself from the steel grip. But the way Hatfield held him, each twist of Boyle's body only hurt the gunman's arm more.

If his companions tried to shoot the tall man who held him they would hit their leader who was held before Hatfield.

Hands dropped to gun grips. They would shoot to kill when they got the chance.

"Reach, the passel of yuh!" came Steve Taylor's sharp command, from the inner doorway.

It was a surprise, and the two gunmen in

the room hesitated—and lost their chance.

A GUNSHOT cracked from the back street, and then Eddie Pope's loud shout came clearly:

"Keep out of there, you two, or the next one cuts yuh down!"

Hatfield had seen to everything, as he had expected a visit from Wagner's hirelings. Eddie Pope was hidden in the shed, covering the back of the house.

"Outside," ordered the Ranger, moving forward, with the furious Boyle in his grip.

Easily he kneed the gunslick before him, and as the two others retreated at his order, the door to the street was open and clear. He picked Sling Boyle up bodily and flung him through the opening.

Boyle landed on his back on the sidewalk and slid under the hitchrail into the gutter. He came up on his knees, his cheek smeared with dirt, his new clothing ruefully stained. His hat had come off, ruffling the pomaded black hair, and his face was scarlet with rage.

Perhaps he feared a shot from inside, for his first move was to rush to one side. His men, drawing Colts, had split to the edges of the big window, out of direct range.

"I'll have yore hide for this, Hald!" shrieked Boyle.

A slug tore into the wooden doorsill, but the sun was on the glass of the window and the gunmen could not see inside. Pistol in hand in there, Hatfield waited, ready for them if they dared charge. Taylor also was in position and aching for a real bangup fight.

But Sling Boyle, cooling off a bit, was smarter than that. The disturbance, shots and yells, had been heard. Bordentown had a town marshal and several deputies, detailed to maintain order in the streets, and while they usually had most of their trouble with drunken celebrants later in the evenings, there were always constables on duty at the police station attached to City Hall.

Boyle knew he could never take the young fellows in the store, not without losing a dozen men, and before the fight would be really rolling, the marshals would be over with shotguns and authority to stop the riot. He turned and hurried off, his men after him.

Men had come from buildings, and stopped, to stare over at the center of the fuss. Passers-by were wary of interfering in a gunfight, for there was no telling which side was in the right, and stray lead had no discrimination about tearing into an innocent bystander.

From the City Hall, an adobe brick building at the north end of the plaza, issued a bony-shanked young man with a brown handlebar mustache. He wore dark pants and shirt and a peaked Stetson. The sun caught the glint of the city marshal's circular badge on his chest as he hurried across the dusty street.

With Boyle and his merry men on the run, Steve Taylor was roaring with laughter. He laughed till the tears streamed from his eyes, slapping his thigh in appreciation.

Hatfield blinked in mild surprise at the waddy's mirth. Taylor had trouble explaining, for a time, as his words were drowned in gasps of merriment.

"Had to—hold in while yuh—was drawin' Boyle!" he panted. "Did yuh see Sling's face? He figgered he was makin' faces and scarin' some pore, harmless business hombre, and it stung him awful when he found what he had hold of!" Taylor wiped moisture from his eyes, shaking his head. "Wish Eddie'd seen it. Yuh was swell, Jim. 'Chicken feed in yore pocket!' Thought I'd bust at that 'un!"

Taylor was again overcome. He was letting loose now, for he had been smarting for some time at the high-handed methods of Wagner and Boyle as the gang sought control of the Panhandle. At last a bit of retaliation had come about, and revenge was sweet. He was still chuckling when the city marshal ducked under the hitchrail and came to the open doorway.

"Say, what goes on here, boys?" the lawman demanded gruffly. "What's all the commotion?"

"Nothin', Marshal," replied the Ranger. "A customer was in here, talking of the price of wheat and such, when his gun went off accidental-like. It scared him so he run out the door and up the road."

THE deputy frowned, craning his neck. He could recognize a pull at his leg.

"Hullo, Steve Taylor," he said then, recognizing the Dotted Circle ranny. "You boys better behave in town, or I'll run yuh in, savvy? Cost you twenty-five dollars. I don't want no disturbances."

"Ev'rything's under control, Marshal Tully," replied Taylor, solemn now. "This here is a respectable business house."

As nobody had been shot and there was

no visible damage, Tully repeated his warning about the inviolability of Bordentown's peace, and took his leave. Taylor rolled a quirly, and as things were quiet, he went out back to retail to Eddie Pope what had occurred.

It was too good to keep to himself.

Hatfield smoked, sitting on his soap-box, leaning against the wall. He was considering his next step, and trying to deduce what Wagner and Boyle would do.

"That patent-leather gunny'll report to his boss right off that I'm tough and that Taylor's in cahoots with me. It'll prod Wagner, that's a cinch. When they come agin, it'll be more careful like. They'll smell around, to see how strong we are."

About half an hour later, the Ranger was thinking it was time to close up for the day and have a drink when a slim lad of about twelve came paddling along. He wore tattered blue jeans and a straw hat. His feet were bare but so calloused he could endure the heated boards and sandy edges of the sidewalk. He stopped, gawking in at the Ranger, who smiled at him.

The tall lawman had a weakness for all children.

"What yuh want, sonny?" he asked.

"Are you Mr. Hald?"

"That's me. Come in and take the load off yore feet."

"I got a note for you, suh. Feller in the store gimme two bits to fetch it to yuh."

He handed Hatfield an envelope, inscribed in flowing, fine writing:

Mr. James Hald

The Ranger gave the young messenger a silver dollar, and patted him on the head. The boy skipped off happily, excited by his sudden wealth. Opening the letter, Hatfield read the handsomely wrought script:

Sir: Will you do me the honor of joining me in Room 5 at 7 P.M. at the Borden Hotel, for a drink? You have nothing to fear in accepting this invitation, but as the matter is most pressing and important, I would advise you not to disappoint

Yours truly,
H. Wagner

Hatfield studied the missive.

"He's curious and wants to try and find out just who I am and what," he decided. "He's as anxious to check up on me as I am on him and his bunch. Reckon I'll go."

CHAPTER VIII

Room 5

WHEN Steve Taylor and Eddie Pope were shown the message, they were against Hatfield's going.

"It's a trap to set yuh up for an easy shot, looks like," insisted Taylor.

But Hatfield shook his head. "That's too simple. First thing a man'd think of, and Wagner must savvy that. I believe I got him interested and that's what I been aimin' at."

"Yeah, why?" asked Pope.

"Well, I promised Armstrong I'd try and help him, didn't I? If I'm goin' to do that, I got to bust Wagner's grip but I can't till I've smelt out how strong he is, and can figger on a plan."

His reasoning was logical enough and satisfied the two cowboys. Anything the tall man said went, now, with them. They were whole-hearted allies.

"I still don't like it," Taylor insisted gloomily. "You goin' there alone, Jim."

"Tell yuh what," suggested the Ranger. "Where's Room Five? Do yuh savvy?"

"Yeah," Steve Taylor nodded. "Johnny Ort give a supper party there last year when one of his gals got hitched. It's in back and is used for private dinners and gamblin' parties."

"Bueno. You hang around outside and make shore nobody tries for me through the winder. Pope can watch the front. With so many folks and the city marshal and the deputies and all around, Wagner couldn't afford a long gunfight. It'd put his own fat hide in danger if he started anything. But to be on the safe side we'll keep our hosses saddled and close to the hotel, out of sight."

Taylor saw the reason in this and felt better, though he had one objection.

"If the marshal comes in there," he said, "he'll make everybody check his gun. They do at night, for some fellers get likkered up and start shootin'."

The three men sat around for a time, smoking, sharing a bottle, and talking things over. When the sun had dropped far toward the horizon and the shadows were long, Hatfield got up and put on a fresh shirt, knotting a black string tie at his throat. He stuck a spare Colt inside his pants belt,

under his clothing. Outside, he wore his usual cartridge belts and Colts.

It was one minute of seven when Hatfield stepped into the Borden Saloon. The bar was crowded with thirsty customers, seeking bracers after the hot, tiring day. Music was being played.

Marshal Tully was standing at the front of the bar. He nodded politely enough to the tall man, and ordered:

"Check yore guns, Hald. City ordinance after six P.M. There's the rack."

The rack was back of the long bar, and Hatfield handed over his folded belts and pistols but said nothing about the concealed gun. The barkeeper gave him a check and he went toward the rear. He did not see Sling Boyle or any of the gunnies who had been along with the killer that afternoon. A waiter pointed down the corridor to Room 5 and the Ranger passed swiftly toward it. The door was shut.

Before knocking, he glanced around. There were other private rooms opening from the passage, and at the end was a door which opened into the street at the rear. Hatfield rapped on the door of Room 5.

"Come in, please," a cheery, deep-toned voice called.

Hatfield lifted the latch, and took the precaution of pushing the door open with his boot toe before placing himself squarely in the doorway. He was able to see into the room. It was done in red plush, with drapes at the twin windows. There was a thick carpet on the floor, a table with a red baize top, several gilt chairs with cushioned red plush seats, two easy chairs, side tables and other furnishings. A gilt lamp hung from the ceiling, over the table.

In one large chair sat a huge fat man, jowls bulging over his white collar. His thin black hair was combed carefully, and a pug nose and black eyes seemed overwhelmed by the surrounding flesh, coyly losing themselves in it. But his mouth was not so timid; it was ugly, thick-lipped. His breathing was audible as, for a moment, the two antagonists sized up one another.

"Well, well, sir, you're really big, like Sling said," the fat man observed. "I'm Herman Wargner. Sit down. No need to be nervous."

BOTH pudgy hands were on the table, and one held a frosted mint julep. The Borden Hotel was up-to-date and had an ice-house.

Wagner had removed his coat. His trousers were black, and his boots had elastic sides. Diamond studs were used as buttons in his white shirt. So far as Hatfield could see, Wagner was not armed, although he could easily conceal a weapon on his stout person. He was alone in the room, though to the right was a closed door that might be a closet. A gunny could hide in there.

THE fat man reached out and pulled a bell cord.

"I'll order a drink. . . . Hald's the name, is that right?"

"That's it, suh. James Hald, from the Rio Grande."

"Nice country. I know it well."

Hatfield pulled the other armchair around so his back would be to a wall and not toward either door or a window. Wagner's eyes twinkled at this. It seemed to amuse him.

"You have nothin' to worry over—tonight," he assured. "But suit yourself."

"Yore pard Boyle might not feel like you do, Wagner," Hatfield said shortly. "I was sort of rough with him when he tried to flimflam me this afternoon."

"Flimflam is hardly the word," said Wagner. "It was a sober warning, but maybe he phrased it crudely. What can you expect from a worthy but uneducated person?"

Plainly Wagner was feeling playful. And his perceptions were keener, his mind quicker than Boyle's. Hatfield was aware of the fat man's sense of power, his surety of self and purpose.

"He likes duelin', I reckon," mused the Ranger. "He'd rather bust me by makin' a fool out of me than by gunnin' me!"

A waiter stuck his head in the door. "What's the word, gents?"

"Two more juleps—large," ordered Wagner. "Tell George to add about a quarter spoonful of sugar to mine. The last was not quite sweet enough." To his guest he said, "Will you have something to eat?"

"No, thanks."

"I dine at nine o'clock," said Wagner. "I'd ask you to join me but I have a previous engagement."

"Don't mention it, suh. I can never stomach food till after ten o'clock."

Wagner made a wry grimace. He had thought he was patronizing his guest, but it did not seem to be working out so well.

And Hatfield himself was thinking that obviously the fat man, chief of the toughs who sought to dominate the Panhandle, was not going to do more at the moment than try to frighten the supposed speculator off, after satisfying his curiosity about the man who had dared challenge his power. It could hardly be expected that a man like Wagner would confide in anyone at such short notice.

When the drinks were brought, Wagner sipped his mint julep, thinking for a moment. He glanced at Hatfield over the frosted brim of the tall glass. The fragrant mint sprigs, the coldness, made a satisfying combination as Hatfield raised his drink.

"Where's your ranch exactly?" inquired Wagner then, wiping his thick-lipped mouth with a silk kerchief from his pocket.

"Yuh savvy the Big Bend country?" asked Hatfield.

Wagner nodded. "Somewhat. Been through there."

"Well, I'm back from the river, but the range is mighty big. Have a lot of trouble with rustlers runnin' wet cattle back and forth so I had to learn to fight good. Fact is, the more I fought, the better I found I liked it. Sort of got used to it, and life seems tame without it. Nearest town is Presidio, but it's a long ride."

"Wild and woolly down there, eh?"

"Oh, yes, suh. Mighty big country. Things grow big, too, hosses and cows and such."

"And you."

"That's right. But I figgered I'd go out into the world and have a fling before I got too old to enjoy it."

Hatfield was talking to convince Wagner that he was what he claimed to be, a rancher with eccentric ideas rather than a Ranger or law officer against whom Wagner would instantly be on his guard. As he talked on about the Big Bend and his fictitious ranch, he kept an eye on the closet door. He still had an idea that Boyle or some other gunny might be hidden behind it.

"Five Thousand Dollars Reward for Dead Bank Robbers—Not One Cent for Live Ones!"

THAT was how the reward notice posted in the town of Lorenzo read—and it meant just what it said. As old Sime Price, president and chief stockholder of the Lorenzo bank, expressed it:

"Ain't no use in catchin' the hellions and lockin' 'em up. They hire smart lawyers who rig up perjured testimony, provide alibis and get 'em off. The only way to put a stop to the safe crackin' and the holdups is to plant the guilty. The only bank robber safe out of the way—is a dead bank robber!"

But Sime Price's harsh attitude wasn't enough to stop the wave of robbery, rustling and sudden death that was overrunning the town of Lorenzo. The outlaws laughed at his poster—and continued their depredations.

Then, into this toughest of tough towns, the Lone Wolf Ranger came riding—ready to match guns and wits with the lawless. He knew he had plenty of hard work cut out for him and faced plenty of danger—but he was determined to establish justice and smash a sinister scheme for range domination.

Jim Hatfield's lively, gun-thunder campaign in Lorenzo is the exciting theme of next month's dynamic complete novel - GOLD FOR THE DEAD.

Look forward to GOLD FOR THE DEAD—it's one of the finest yarns Jackson Cole has ever written, and it's a trigger-fanning thriller from start to finish!

WHEN he had run down and was drinking again, Wagner said:

"So you rode up here and decided to take this fling you mention in wheat and flour, eh? Ticklish game. Price fluctuates. A big crop in Russia or elsewhere may kill your profit; a drought in Dakota could make you rich overnight."

"That's what I like. Gamblin' suits me to a T. Couple of weeks back, in El Paso, I won thirty thousand dollars on the turn of a card."

"H'm. Sort of a Don Quixote, ain't you—only you're lookin' for flour mills to charge!"

Wagner laughed at his own jest. He seemed surer of his ground now, believing the tall fellow was working alone, save for what allies he had picked up since reaching Bordentown.

"Well, well," he said heartily, "your life history's mighty intriguing, son. But you *are* a gambler. Now you've come to the wrong spot for it. You're bucking a sure thing. You'll lose—you can't win. Why not keep going a couple or three hundred miles, and see what it's like in Kansas? They grow wheat there, and in Minnesota too. Mighty fine wheat. But around here—and when I say around I mean within a hundred miles for the time being—I don't intend to stand for opposition."

Hatfield looked sorrowful. "Yuh wouldn't consider lettin' me enjoy myself in these parts for a while?"

SLING BOYLE

"Of course not."

Wagner was almost contemptuous. He glanced at a fat gold watch, with a diamond fob, which he drew from his pocket.

With innocent mien, the Ranger feigned not to notice. He took another sip of his mint julep.

"One of the funniest things ever happened," he drawled reminiscently, "was when I was a brat ridin' wild mustangs whenever I could catch holt of one's mane. 'Twas at my Uncle Jeff's. He had the spread next my old man's, savvy? Great feller, my uncle—and my dad, too.

"One time Uncle Jeff goes to the rodeo and he wins the cutest little squealer you ever see in yore life, shootin' at targets. He named this animal Gordon, after a favorite cousin of his, and nothin' was good enough or too good for Gordon. My uncle took him in the house and first thing yuh know, Gordon was sleepin' in the bed with Uncle Jeff. My Aunt Clara got sore and refused to share her couch with a piglet, so she had to sleep in the spare room.

"Well, Gordon grew mighty fine, naturally enough, as he had the run of the kitchen and even ate at the table, on a stool next my uncle. He got all the best apples and tidbits, and he'd foller my uncle everywhere he went—Uncle Jeff would hoist him up and tote him when he went ridin'."

The fat man was interested, listening to the story.

"What happened?" he askde.

"Gordon got so big my uncle had to extend the bed so's he'd have room to sleep hisself, as Gordon took up so much space. He had to brace the floorin' so's it wouldn't cave in. Gordon was spoilt, too. He'd snoot everybody who come in and he'd chase my aunt out of the pantry if he felt like it. Figgered he was better'n anybody else and he was right for a time.

"But one day my aunt left the door to the store-room unlocked. Uncle Jeff had six barrels of fine apples he'd had shipped in for Gordon, and the head had been knocked off one. Nobody seen Gordon till too late. He ate the whole barrel."

Hatfield paused and shook his head sadly.

"And then?" asked the fat man.

"Gordon blowed up with a bang which knocked the roof off the shed and killed three chickens that was scratchin' outside. That was the end of another hog I knowed."

A red came into Wagner's bloated cheeks.

He had been led on to listen to the yarn and now he was well aware that Hatfield was laughing at him. He reached forth a pudgy hand, a frown on his face, and struck a silver bell which gave three quick peals. The bell had a sharp tone, penetrating to the ears.

CHAPTER IX

Close Call

AT ONCE Hatfield knew that bell was not a call for a waiter. Instantly he was alert. It might be a signal, and he watched the closet door, the windows, for the slightest warning. But nothing happened.

"You're not so clever as I thought you might be, sir," Wagner said. "Good evening. Remember my warnin'."

Hatfield rose. "The drink was first-class, Wagner. See yuh around the saloons."

Wagner glowered. He was finished with the tall stranger.

The silver voice of the bell was still ringing in the Ranger's mental ears as he moved to the door and flung it open. The hallway was clear. He had half-expected to see Boyle or other gunslicks waiting. The bell signal, however, had brought no result that he could observe.

He reached the crowded main bar and, picking up his Colts, buckled them on. When he went outside, Eddie Pope was standing in the shadows, off to one side of the building.

"Ain't seen hide nor hair of 'em, Jim," Pope reported.

They walked swiftly around the block, and found Steve Taylor, guarding the back of the hotel. Their saddled horses were a few yards away, behind a long carriage shed.

The cowboys were intensely curious about what had happened, and Hatfield gave them a quick résumé of his interview with Herman Wagner.

"He wanted to check on me, draw me out," he said. "He was afraid I might be somethin' else than what I claimed. When he found out all he could, he warned me and shooed me out."

"Huh," growled Taylor. "I kept expectin' perdition to pop but nothin' developed. I'm surprised they didn't try to down yuh while they had yuh in there."

JOHNNY ORT

"Wagner prob'ly didn't fancy bein' too close to me in a ruckus," drawled Hatfield. "Boyle may have told him I was fast. No doubt he figgered I had a spare gun hid on me."

"I'm sleepy," yawned Pope. "What say we get some shut-eye?"

"Good idea," agreed Hatfield.

It was only a short distance to the little building which Hatfield had rented, but they mounted and rode slowly along the street, with Steve Taylor in the lead, Pope next, then the Ranger on Goldy. Hatfield was uneasy. The hackles kept rising on his spine. He had no distinct basis for the feeling, but sometimes, when danger threatened, a certain sense which he had developed in his Ranger work until it had grown keen made him feel this way.

"Take it easy, Pope," he called softly. "Watch the shadows, boys."

The sounds of revelry in the night, music and voices, and now and then the neigh of a waiting horse on State Street, came to them.

"I don't fancy big towns," mused the Ranger. "Too many spots for drygulchers to hide."

He pulled up several yards from his back door, and looked all around, but nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary. They dismounted in front of the shed where they kept their horses.

"I'll fetch the lantern," said Taylor.

Hatfield couldn't shake off that uneasy feeling. He dropped Goldy's reins and took a step after Taylor, who had crossed the dirt away and was opening the door into the house.

"Steve!" called the Ranger sharply, and Taylor turned inquiringly. "Wait a jiffy."

Hatfield quickly joined Taylor. There was no sound from the interior of the place, yet the Ranger was acutely ill at ease. He was remembering the bell Wagner had banged, yet so far there had been no explanation for the signal.

"What's the matter?" asked Pope, starting toward them.

"I don't like the smell of this," muttered Hatfield.

He shifted suddenly, bumping against Taylor. A faint sound had come from inside, the rustle a man's sleeve might make against his side when he raised a gun. Abruptly then, from inside, a heavy gun flamed, stabbing at them with its death tongue!

STEVE TAYLOR shrieked in agony and was falling as the Ranger caught his arm and whirled off to one side, close to the house wall. He heard the whine of many bullets, and knew now that the building was teeming with enemies who were in there and had been waiting for them to return.

Pushing Taylor behind him, Hatfield hastily drew a Colt, and as a too eager killer stuck head and shoulders from the back doorway, the Ranger put a slug through him. The gunny fell in the opening, half blocking the men behind him.

"I—I'm only cut," gasped Taylor.

Eddie Pope had drawn and was opening fire, cutting at a window with his lead. Hatfield could hear the whole gang now, many men, as heavy heels thudded, shaking the little structure.

"Out and at 'em, fellers!" That sounded like Sling Boyle.

The three attacked men had only a second to cross the narrow back street and reach their horses. Luckily the animals were saddled and ready to go. Reaching the corner of the stable shed, the Ranger stood there, and his hot Colt slowed the enemy. They did not want to come at him in a frontal rush.

"Come on, Jim!" howled Pope, who had boosted Taylor into saddle.

The startled mustangs were dancing, fighting their bits, eager to be off.

Hatfield emptied his pistol, dropped it in a supple holster, drew a loaded weapon. He turned, leaped on Goldy, and followed his two cowboy friends through the narrow paths to the adjoining street, two blocks from the town's main one.

Picking up speed with a spurt, they had almost reached the turn before Boyle and his men got to the opening where they could fire after them. Wild bullets missed, and the fleeing men galloped southward, heading out of the town.

Hatfield kept an eye on Taylor, low over his horse. He feared the cowboy might become unconscious and be thrown, but Taylor kept his seat.

"Where to?" called Pope, looking over his hunched shoulder when they were out on the rolling area beyond the settlement's buildings. The lurid lights of Bordentown filled the sky with a menacing glow.

"West," ordered the Ranger. "Let's gain a few miles, then see how Steve is."

"I'm all right," called Taylor. "It's my cheek. It's tore, that's all."

He spoke thickly, for one side of his face was ripped, covered with blood which was dripping to his shoulder.

They were not pursued from the town. At a point on the river, a couple of miles out, they drew up, and looked at Taylor's wound. Hatfield washed it as best he could, then wrapped a clean handkerchief around Taylor's jaws to help check the bleeding.

"S'pose we make for Armstrong's," suggested the Ranger. "They'll clean up that slash for yuh, Steve, and we can sleep there."

Pope and Taylor were agreeable, and they headed for the wheat farm.

As they put the miles behind them, Hatfield glanced back at Bordentown. Now he could see the lights of the town reflected in the prairie sky.

"Wagner sort of holds all the aces there," he mused to himself, but aloud he said:

"Now I savvy what that bell signal meant. Somebody was listenin', in case Wagner give it. If I didn't cotton to and heed Wagner's warnin', it was arranged for Boyle and his slicks to catch us when we got home."

"They're mighty tough, that gang," Pope said grimly. "It was a close one, boys. I don't mind fightin' open-like and decent, but they'd drygulch a man soon as they'd wink."

It was late when they reached the wheat

farm, and everything was dark, shut up for the night. But Hatfield thought Taylor needed attention.

"Aw, let's wait till mornin'," objected Taylor.

"No. Hot water'll keep that cut from gettin' bad on yuh, Steve."

HATFIELD pounded on the front door until Armstrong woke, and called to ask who it was. The farmer no doubt feared a night attack. He seemed relieved to find who it was, and soon his wife and daughter, Florrie, were hovering over the injured Taylor who had been seated in a chair by the kitchen table.

The women made coffee and set out a lunch. After the three visitors had eaten, they repaired to the barracks and turned in.

The next day broke hot and fair. The Ranger, who would not have been surprised had Boyle launched another attack during the night, enjoyed a hearty breakfast in the kitchen, with Taylor and Pope. The two Armstrong boys were greatly impressed by the tall visitor. They tagged after him wherever he went, though they had chores to do about the place.

The science of wheat farming deeply interested Jim Hatfield. Dave Armstrong was expert at it and could talk for hours on varieties of spring and winter wheats.

The Ranger accompanied the farmer as he made a tour of his place.

CHAPTER X

Wheat Farm

MANY of the hands who had been working on the Armstrong wheat farm had packed up and decamped after the violent night attack by Boyle's gunnies. There were plenty of other spots where they could labor, without risking their lives.

"No reason for 'em to stick," Armstrong told Jim Hatfield. "I can't protect 'em and they're not armed. Only temporary helpers, anyway."

"How long can yuh let that wheat stand in the fields?" asked Hatfield.

Armstrong shrugged. "If it gets over-ripe, the winds and birds will destroy a great deal. It must be harvested and threshed and stored at the proper time."

Hatfield saw the big plows, with sixteen-inch shares, drawn by five horses, which turned the sod over in October. Harrows twenty-five feet across broke up the clods.

"After that," went on Armstrong, "we have horse-drawn press drills. Takes a month to seed five thousand acres."

"You buy seed?"

"Oh, no. We use selected and cleaned seeds from the previous harvest. Of course, before ploughing, old straw must be burned off. When the seeding's through, we let the extra hands go. They move north, but return to help with the harvest. A wheat grower who knows his business will pick the right seed to start with, a seed adapted to fit the local climate and soil. Besides the wheat, we grow some corn, oats and millet to feed our stock."

"Mighty interestin'." The Ranger nodded. "How long's the harvest run usually?"

"Oh, ten days to three weeks. We have threshing machines. The grain falls from the harvester into the box-wagon, in which it may be taken to the elevator at the mill or railroad. Or it may be bagged. We use a carload of twine in no time. Expenses run high, you see, with labor and equipment, and unless you're a mighty big operator and have backing, you may lose all you own with one crop failure."

"How long's MacLane's mill been operatin'?" asked Hatfield.

"This is really the first full year. It was set up late last summer and he milled maybe half the local crop."

"What were you doin' with yore grain before that?"

"Cartin' it to the railroad. It costs more money that way, for us. MacLane paid fair market prices and was decent to deal with, unlike Wagner. You know this is only my fourth year in the Panhandle. I started in Pennsylvania, but the earth grew tired, and I wanted to try this virgin soil, and go at it in a big way."

"And you buy flour for yoreselves to eat, after growin' so much wheat?"

Armstrong shook his head. "No, we keep enough to feed our families and workers. MacLane kindly agreed to grind what we needed ourselves, for almost nothing."

"Who ground it before the steam roller mill come along?"

"There's an old grist mill five miles from here, where a tributary creek of the river drops a few feet over a rock formation. We

hauled our grain there."

"And who was the miller?"

"Old fellow named Phillips. He's not there any longer, though. Gone to live with his married daughter in Kansas."

"Huh." The Ranger was thoughtful. "Ain't there anybody in these parts who could run that grist mill?"

"I could," Armstrong told him. "I know enough about such milling to produce edible flour."

"Well, I'll think it over. Startin' up that old mill might needle Wagner."

He wanted to force Wagner's hand, draw the man out. He knew he had managed to impress Wagner somewhat in Bordentown, but not enough. If he opened a rival mill, even though it were the old-fashioned sort which could not handle the volume possible with the steam roller outfit, it would be a thorn in the MM company's side. The thought was with him all the time as they rode back to the Armstrong farmhouse.

About three o'clock that quiet afternoon, Hatfield found Armstrong working in his barn. Crippled by the beating he had received, the grower was not up to the strain of field work as yet, so was doing odd jobs around the home and outbuildings.

"How about takin' a ride over to the grist mill?" suggested Hatfield.

ARMSTRONG was agreeable. The only hope to which he could cling now was that this tall stranger might somehow be able to break Wagner's hold on the growers. Many of the wheat farmers had been intimidated by the strong-arm tactics Wagner's men employed, and Armstrong told the Ranger that any attempt to cart their grain to the grist mill would result in instant attacks on the wagons transporting it. And there would be severe reprisals—that had been threatened. But the wheat grower went along with Hatfield willingly. . . .

The old mill building had been built of raw lumber, and was blackened by the hot Panhandle sun. It lay southward of the farm. The stream dropped for some feet over a hard red rock formation. To take advantage of gravity's force, a stone and earth dam had been built and there was a race through which the swift water might be diverted to fall on the great blades of the huge outside wheel.

"How come she ain't turnin'?" inquired Hatfield, as he and Armstrong rode up to the tree-shaded building.

"There's a floodgate, controlled by that screw valve up there," Armstrong pointed out.

"Oh, yeah, I see now. If we close that water gate, it'll swing the crik through the race onto the wheel."

"Right."

Dismounting, they walked to the sagging doors. Floor boards creaked beneath their weight as they entered the gloomy interior, where rats scurried off at their approach. There was a musty odor, and before them were great millstones, connected by a shaft to the bladed water-wheel.

"First, the grain should be cleaned of seeds and other foreign particles," explained Armstrong. "Then the grain is fed into this hopper, and is crushed between the stones. This upper one, which turns, is called the 'runner', and the fixed one below is the 'bed.' Here you'd simply grind in one operation, but the roller mills produce much finer flour, with three steps to get rid of the undesirable parts of the berry. Millers have a different name for each stage—'semolina,' 'middlings,' and 'dunst.' Really, the whole wheat flour is better for you but folks are demandin' more and more white breads."

"Let's see if she'll work," suggested Hatfield.

They shut the big water-gate, and then waited for a time, as a head built up and began passing through the canal. With creaking groans that split the air of the summer afternoon, the great wheel began to turn.

"Let's go inside and engage the gears," said the wheat grower.

A big upright hand lever, when pulled all the way back, made connection between the outside wheel shaft and the heavy grinding stones, which added their din to the working noises of the grist mill.

"Seems to be all right," announced Armstrong, after he had gone over the machinery. "All that's needed now is to feed wheat into that hopper. It comes out at this point, and can be bagged or barreled."

"Fine!" exclaimed the Ranger. "I aim to set up as a miller, if you'll stick here and tend to the technical part, Armstrong. Steve Taylor can be manager—yore helper—and we'll spread the word among yore friends they can have grain ground cheap. It'll prod Herman Wagner."

Armstrong seemed reluctant. "Wagner

doesn't need much more proddin' to start killin', Hald. So far, he's tried to frighten us by threats and beatings. However, I'll take a chance, because I believe I'd rather be dead than knuckle under to any man."

"That's the talk! Yuh oughta carry a gun, though. Why not let me show yuh how to use a Colt? It's simple enough."

Armstrong shook his head. "I'd rather not. I don't want to kill anyone. All I want is to be let alone to pursue my business."

The grower was determined on this point.

"I'll have to keep near him, that's all, and try to beat 'em off if they decide to finish him," thought Hatfield.

He liked Armstrong. The farmer was a solid person, with a nature that drew others and grew on people as they came to know him better.

THE following morning, Armstrong sent messengers around to inform other growers in the region that the old grist mill was in operation and that they might have their wheat ground into flour there. At Hatfield's insistence, James Hald, his alias, was named as the miller, but Armstrong added a line saying he would be on the spot.

Taylor's flesh wound was not serious, and the cowboy and his partner, Pope, were honing for action. Eager to please Florrie and her father, Steve at once agreed to assist at the mill. Pope, not under the strawberry blonde's spell to such an extent, hesitated about turning miller. But he was quite willing to stay around for a time, since Hatfield privately told him they could expect trouble from Wagner's quarter, once the news got around that a rival mill had been set up.

The Ranger meant to catch Herman Wagner, to gain sure-fire evidence against Sling Boyle's bunch, before he struck back. But in the meantime he had been looking about for allies, to use when he was ready. Johnny Ort might supply him with a few fighters, but the wheat growers themselves were not trained with weapons or at riding, requisites necessary in striking at such a gang as Boyle led.

Steve Taylor sought Hatfield out for a private word, while Armstrong was loading bags of wheat into a box-wagon.

"S'pose Boyle attacks here while we're away?" he asked.

"I don't think he will," replied Hatfield. "Armstrong's the one they're tryin' to scare. With him away, they ain't likely to do any damage. And when they hear I'm runnin' the grist mill, they'll prob'ly get so hot after me, they'll leave Armstrong alone till they've dealt with me. That's what happened in town."

"Yuh're usually right," Steve nodded. "And we can look out for Dave better, I reckon, when we're with him."

"That's what I thought. Armstrong's important, Steve. He stands for what resistance there is to Wagner in the Panhandle at the present time."

Mrs. Armstrong and Florrie had packed a large basket of food for them to take with them. Armstrong loaded a keg of apple cider in the box-wagon and they started for the grist mill. The farmer drove the four-horse team, while the three riders followed on their horses.

It was another clear, warm day, and Armstrong shook his head as they passed between the fenced wheat fields.

"Grain's ripenin' fast," he said worriedly. "Either I'll have to bow to Wagner and let him have it cheap or it'll be ruined. I can't keep reapers and threshers on the job, with Boyle gunning 'em out."

Taylor was whistling cheerily, joking with Eddie Pope as they rode. He had a white bandage on one cheek, covering the flesh wound. They were a coltish pair, given to practical jests on one another, and always ready with a quip. For the fire of youth blazed in their hearts.

Hatfield enjoyed their banter and the fun, but he had a lot on his mind. He was charged with crushing Wagner, who had a head start in the section.

Eventually, with the passing of years, law and order would come to the Panhandle, as the population increased, with soberer elements entering the district. It would take time, however, and in a harvest or two, Wagner could make a fortune, and perhaps consolidate his position.

"He could buy up land, such as Armstrong's, after smashin' the growers out," Hatfield thought. "Then he could lease, and nobody could touch him."

At the moment—which naturally was what counted to David Armstrong and his friends—the forces of law were thinly flung on the Frontier, and unable to bear quickly on Herman Wagner. It was up to the Ranger, as old McDowell had pointed out, to prove to the Panhandle that Texas could take care of her own.

CHAPTER XI

Gunslinger Charge

ONCE arrived at the old mill, Hatfield and the two cowboys placed their horses in the shade. They helped Armstrong lower the keg of cider with a length of rope into the running stream where it would be kept cool, and after that began pouring wheat into the hopper.

Armstrong engaged the gears. A terrific din resulted, the water-wheel groaning and creaking, splashing water as the swift race hit its big blades. The shafts were rusted, and squealed like tortured souls. The heavy stones, nearly five-feet in diameter, ground with a sound which made those unaccustomed to it shiver up the spine. They had to shout to make themselves heard.

"Well, dang my hide, it comes out flour!" exclaimed Pope.

"What did yuh expect—triplets?" yelled Taylor.

The product was grayish-brown.

"Looks mighty dark," said the Ranger to Armstrong.

The wheat grower nodded. "It's whole wheat flour. We'd have to run it through properly sized rollers to separate the finer stuff out. Then, if you wanted it entirely white, you'd have to bleach it."

"I see. Reckon it's all right, though," Hatfield nodded.

"It's better for you than bleached flour. Has all the elements of the whole grain."

They ground several bags of flour. Dust filled the interior, and millions of motes slowly rose in the shafts of sunlight that came in at the double doors and through cracks in the blackened boards of the barn-like structure. Time and again Pope, Taylor and the Ranger retreated outside, to sneeze, cough, and try to brush the flour off their clothing.

"This ain't no life for yores truly," declared Pope. "I'm a cowboy, not a dust hog."

Taylor felt the same way, but did not say so aloud. He wanted to impress Armstrong, and after a time returned to aid in the milling. Before noon, two box-wagons drove up. Hatfield was glad to shake hands with two more wheat-growers, friends of Armstrong's.

"This here is Bob Kenny," said Dave Armstrong, introducing a stout, serious-faced, brown-haired fellow with a round head, and who wore blue overalls and an old shirt. "And this is Mort Green." Green was slimmer, taller, with a determined chin and straight blue eyes. He, too, wore jeans and a straw hat. "Meet Jim Hald, boys, a new friend of ours. He's aimin' to fight Herman Wagner's combine."

"Huh!" grunted Kenny, mopping sweat from his brow. "All by hisself, you mean?"

Green stared at the tall man too.

"You've bit off plenty, Hald," he said. "Wagner's tough. We both had letters from him, warnin' us not to go ag'in the MM company. But when we got Dave's message this mornin', we run over to see what was what."

"What Wagner needs is some real, honest-to-goodness attention," drawled Hatfield. "And I aim to give it to him, gents."

While the two growers were not so pacifistic as Armstrong, they were not gun throwers and they preferred to keep the peace. They had women and children to think of, and there had been threats of retaliation against the weak and innocent, uttered by Boyle and his ugly crew.

That afternoon, Hatfield met three more friends of David Armstrong's—Panhandle settlers. They were hard-working, decent men, with families and the cares that life brings.

The four were back at Armstrong's by dark. Next day they repaired once more to the mill. Other growers appeared, ostensibly to have grain ground into flour, but all were more interested in the attempt to flout Herman Wagner and the chances of smashing the man's power.

Pope had quickly tired of the manual labor involved.

"I got a real job for yuh, Eddie," said the Ranger. "You ride circle between here and Bordentown, and give me warnin' when Boyle shows up. The news we're set up here ought to trickle back to Wagner soon. And either I don't know him or he'll do somethin' about it."

POPE brightened. He was bored, hanging around the mill. Saddling up, the cowboy rode off on the dirt road which led northeast from the mill. It joined the highway into Bordentown some miles east of Armstrong's.

The second day passed, with Pope watching the road and unfenced areas near the creek, for not all the section was planted as yet. There were stony stretches here and there which were unsuitable for farming.

It was close to noon the third day, when Eddie Pope came galloping in to report to Hatfield.

"I spotted four of Boyle's gunnies, Hald! They come along the main road, then cut over to the crik and up the bank a ways. From a high rock, they spied on the mill with field-glasses. When they'd had a good peek, they went back toward town."

In the late afternoon, Hatfield escorted Armstrong's wagon back to the wheat farm. But after supper, he saddled Goldy again and, alone, rode over toward the flour mill, several miles south. He had an uneasy feeling which he could not down.

The sun was near its setting, but the air was still ovenlike. Over the Staked Plain the ruby rays of lights danced, and the rising heat waves from the ground shimmered visibly upward, offering mirages and other strange optical illusions.

Hatfield had come out alone, because he had wanted to leave Pope and Taylor to guard Armstrong. He had sought to turn Wagner's wrath from the leader of the wheat growers onto his own head, and so far he had succeeded. That Wagner was very much aware of the new arrival on the scene had been proved by the episodes in Bordentown.

From Armstrong's it was only an hour's easy run to the grist mill. Passing the lower limits of wheat, Jim Hatfield reached the dry-rutted trace, with the mill at one end and the Bordentown pike at the other. His gray-green eyes, trained to distances and keen as an eagle's, moved about the horizon.

He could make out the bulk of the mill on the creek. And the other way, he saw the dust of approaching riders. Men were coming on the road, and suddenly they topped the wavelike rise and sighted him.

Sling Boyle rode at their head. There were some thirty of them, the Ranger decided, as he estimated the enemy forces.

"They're aimin' for the mill!" he growled.

Goldy picked up speed, as the ravening pack howled and opened fire on him at long range. The Ranger rode at top speed for the mill.

Hatfield had several minutes in which to make ready, as Boyle's gunmen drove at the grist mill. Behind him was the deep stream bed, so there was only the main door to watch.

He took his carbine and the extra belt of cartridges for the weapon, then led Goldy to the creek bank. He did not unsaddle the golden sorrel, but hooked the reins to the horn.

"Go across and wait for me, Goldy," he ordered.

A caressing slap on the haunches sent the beautiful gelding into the water, and splashing to the south bank. The mount knew what his rider wanted him to do and he would keep well away from the enemy, wait until Hatfield whistled him up.

A bullet hit the wooden wall of the mill. It came nearly through, as a large, fresh splinter inside showed. The Ranger had his carbine loaded, and the light was still good for shooting. He crouched just inside the main doors, with a heavy, twelve by twelve upright beam giving good protection.

The Ranger waited, cool as ice, until the attackers swept in close. He did not intend to throw lead into the air.

Sling Boyle had recognized the tall rider from his sobering experience with Hatfield at the town office of the man he believed to be a wheat buyer. But many of Boyle's followers had not yet tested the Ranger's strength, the whiplash of his striking force, and these spurted ahead, whooping it up, Colts and shotguns going as they charged straight at the wide-open doors. Evidently they believed they could overawe him, make him run.

Heavy slugs and spreading buck whooshed through the entry or drove into the walls, some coming through, but the big beam was impervious to bullets save when one cut its edge and tore off a splinter.

HATFIELD had the bunched, attacking crowd in his carbine sights and could not miss. He fired with rapidity, and a carbine load holed a gunny's right shoulder, another thudded sickeningly into a second's thigh. A third man took it in the chest, sagging dead in his saddle. The two wounded men shrieked, veering away from the bunch.

The Winchester muzzle in the slim, steady Ranger hands, trained for such desperate work, moved in a relentless arc. When his magazine was emptied, every shot had slashed or driven into an enemy. He whipped out a heavy revolver and continued shooting, his jaw set, his gray-green eyes the

hue of an icy Arctic sea.

The bedlam was awful, the cries of the wounded and the shrill whinnying of an injured mustang mingling with the staccato banging of the guns. They drove close, and the Ranger Colts were effective at such range. Flaming pistols in the hands of the tall man crouched just behind the heavy upright seemed to menace every charging killer.

Almost any man would have turned and run for it, faced with such a ferocious charge. But Hatfield chose to make a stand, and the gunmen suddenly felt a chill of fear, made superstitious perhaps, by the punishment a single fighter inflicted on their overpowering odds. Had they been willing to lose half a dozen more men, they could have reached the entrance to the old mill, charged through and caught him with their fire. But the accuracy of his guns, the sheer cold courage of the Ranger, shattered the nerve of even the bolder vanguard.

"Keep back, yuh fools!" bellowed Sling Boyle.

Men in front peeled off from the flaming Colts. He creased another, the Stetson flying from the man's singed scalp.

The wounded, cursing and grimacing, did not help the morale of the others. The charge broke entirely, and the survivors hastily galloped around to the other side of the building, and rode back to rejoin Boyle and their other more cautious companions.

At a safe distance, Sling Boyle sent the injured men back toward Bordentown. Two lay still on the flat approach to the door.

In the lull, Hatfield reloaded his hot carbine, and his Colts. Acrid powder smoke drifted past his flared nostrils. The creaking wheel, the splashing water, broke the stillness.

Through a crack in the north wall, he watched Boyle and others dismount.

"Goin' to wait it out till dark," he thought. "Well, me, too!"

CHAPTER XII

A Real Impression

NO LONGER was there the slightest doubt about the tall Texan in the minds of Boyle's gunnies. They were tough, but he was tougher, and his savage fighting power made such souls as theirs quail. Until Hatfield's arrival, they had had an easy time of it, beating and cowing unorganized and usually poorly armed farmers, if they were armed at all.

The Ranger glanced around. His rear was fairly safe. The great wheel turned there with the rushing race pushing the blades. There was an opening where the shaft came through, and a drop to the foaming, rocky creek bed below. To get in that way, a man would have to work around the building past the wheel, on a slippery mud bank, and boost himself up past the supports of the wheel. These men would not try it in the daylight—not after that first rush.

Some who seemed unhurt rode away to the north, after a conference with Sling Boyle. Hatfield watched them moving in the general direction of Armstrong's but there were only three riders, and certainly Pope and Taylor could handle them if they dared strike.

The remaining members of Boyle's gang dropped rein and settled down, after spreading out in a half circle which covered the north bank of the stream.

Twenty minutes went by. The gunnies were smoking, lounging on the warm earth. Some had brought along flasks of whisky and these were passed around. They remained at a safe range from the mill.

Now the huge red disc of the setting sun seemed tangent to the escarpment of the Staked Plain. Reds, purples and other vivid colors danced in the clouds and on the horizon. With a swooping suddenness, the sun dropped and night was at hand.

It was several minutes before eyes could become adjusted and stars could be seen. The moon made a bright area on the horizon, but was not yet up, and peepers and frogs along the creek added their myriad voices to nature's song. The purling water, the groaning wheel, made up an ear-filling symphony.

The Ranger moved along in the dark interior of the mill. The boards of the flooring creaked softly under his weight, but these sounds were lost in the general noises. He made a round of the building, peering out now and then from a wide crack. He could see the pale plain, and if any dark figures had been moving near the mill, he was sure he could have made them out.

"Shorely they won't quit that easy," he muttered.

Stung to fury by what he had done to

them, they would be thirsting for his blood. They would kill him by fair means or foul. Soon the moon would be up, and Hatfield would feel better then, for in its silvery light it would be easier to spy creeping enemies.

The minutes dragged. He had expected the waiting gunmen to try to get in under the cloak of darkness. But nearly an hour passed by and the moon, now low in the night sky, was growing larger and threatening the stars with extinction by its reflected glory.

Still no attack. The Ranger restlessly made his rounds again, peeking from the openings in the walls, straining his ears to listen. Several times he went to the edge of the pit, to look below where the water foamed past the wheel blades. It was about twelve feet to the creek bed, and black rocks stuck up from the stream.

It was about nine o'clock, he figured, when he thought he caught stirrings in the direction of the spot where the enemy had taken up position. Listening intently, he was sure he heard the thudding of mustang hoofs and the low hum of voices.

Ten minutes later, gun in hand, hammer spur back under his long thumb, Hatfield sighted them, crawling toward the mill.

He could make out the dark shapes of the moving men on the plain, outlined in the moonshine. An inch-wide crack permitted a fair field of fire, but he could not check the two wings to right and left without moving for a direct look. There were none on the side of the open doorway.

He let them get a bit nearer, to be sure. Then he took aim and raised his thumb.

The Colt kicked back against his palm. Somebody outside gave a yelp of agony, and the half dozen figures leaped to their feet and pelted back. Hatfield sent two bullets after them.

He grinned as he heard Boyle swearing, raving, his voice rising over the other noises.

"Sounds like the cuss had felt my lead," Hatfield decided, pleased.

THERE was a faint wind, a night breeze stirring over the plains. After a few minutes, the Ranger caught a familiar thudding, that of galloping mustangs, charging the mill. They were coming, the whole mob, at full speed!

Such targets in the night were difficult to hit. He could cover only a narrow avenue of approach from the various wall cracks. They did not try the wide doorway. In fact, as he let go at the swift shadows, they zigzagged, came whirling past the walls.

Guns were going, as they aimed at the flashes of his Colts, and with the danger of a slug catching him as it came through the boards, he could not remain in one spot for more than an instant. Even so, the force and volume of the fire of the attackers made it too close for comfort.

In a brief lull, he caught a dull, sloshing sound, then a yellow flame suddenly burst into being, like some giant flower, growing with breath-taking speed. The Ranger sniffed, as the odor of kerosene oil filled his nostrils.

"Burnin' me out!"

He had no doubt that Boyle had been sent by Herman Wagner to destroy the grist mill. They had thought to find it deserted, easy taking, in the evening. When he had beaten them off, Boyle had sent men to steal or take coal oil forcibly from some farmer's storage shed. In the night they might even have obtained it at the home of Armstrong, the nearest grower.

Hatfield knew he could not stay in the mill. The big wheel created a draught, which sucked the oil-fed flames through and helped ignite the tinder-dry lumber. Dense smoke, the lurid glow of the flames, had already enveloped the north wall. He coughed as the wind blew billows of hot vapor into his face, making his eyes water blindingly.

The heat was intense. It threatened to singe his flesh, and he backed toward the turning wheel.

They had hurled several big cans of kerosene onto the north wall. The mill was doomed.

In the surging smoke, the Ranger knelt down, and checked the opening where the wheel turned. Down on the floor, the smoke was not so bad, and he could make out the roiled water, the black shape of boulders in the stream.

"Watch it, Ted!" a hoarse voice, which seemed almost in his ear suddenly said. "It's slippery as all get-out."

They were trying to work to the shaft opening!

Hatfield craned his neck, lying flat on the floor, and could see two men on the steep bank not far from the wheel. He fired at once, his Colt roaring its defiance. One man fell, rolling down the bank, and a wheel

blade hit him and threw him into the pool. The second hastily turned and fled.

The Ranger pouched his Colts. His carbine was stuck through his belt at his back. He needed both hands. Gripping the edge of the flooring where it ended at the hole, he let himself through, holding an instant before he dropped.

The great wheel menaced him, and the race caught at him, rolled him over and over. His ribs came up hard against a sharp rock and he half-drowned as he fought for his life. The Winchester carbine slipped from his belt, but he managed to catch it before it was gone.

The current quickly slowed, once he was past the wheel. He grounded in the shallows of the undercut bank, with the blazing mill looming overhead. The fire was swiftly enveloping the structure. Howls of triumphant gunnies were added to the roar of the blaze, the crackling timbers, the creak of the still moving wheel.

Hatfield ducked into the stream, to avoid the bright light, and swam into the current. The water covered him, and he reached the south bank. Pulling himself out, he glanced back over his shoulder. In the swirling smoke he spied a horseman, then another. They were waiting for him, guns up, to run from the burning building!

He crawled through the thin line of brush on the creek bank, then got up and ran.

SHRILL whistles issued from his lips. Goldy, running on the plain, would not be far away. Soon the golden shape of the swift sorrel loomed before him, the animal sniffing and giving a low whinny of greeting as he joined his trailmate, the Texas Ranger.

Shaking the water from his gun barrels, Hatfield mounted. He was sopping wet, but it wasn't cold, and he had escaped with but a few minor scratches and bruises.

Immediately he put distance between himself and the enemy, for in the open they could overrun him. Then he dried his pistols and carbine carefully, and applied oil which he carried in his slender saddlebags.

By this time, the old grist mill was a ruined, red-hot mass of flame. The wheel had stopped and the north wall had caved in, sending a great shower of sparks into the air. Then the roof fell, slanting, into the fire.

With a sigh of regret, Hatfield rode off, looking back now and again. The conflagration would be visible for miles.

Tired from the long fight, Hatfield kept on west until he was some distance from the site of the mill, though the flames from it reddened the whole night sky for miles. He crossed the creek then, and watching always for signs of his foes, started for Armstrong's.

A fenced wheat field blocked him, but he dismounted and held the wire to the ground so that Goldy could cross without getting cut on the barbs. Mounting, he rode up through the waving grain, feeling it brush at his damp knees.

There was another fence, which bordered the east-west road, and crossing this, he turned toward Armstrong's, arriving about midnight. Steve Taylor challenged him as he crossed the bend of the Borden River and made for the buildings.

"Howdy, Jim!" sang out Taylor, as the Ranger quickly made himself known. "Is that the mill burnin' below? The red in the sky woke up the whole place!"

"That's it, Steve."

Hatfield wanted some hot coffee, some food. He wanted dry clothing also, and he needed sleep. But he paused long enough to tell Taylor briefly what had occurred.

"Shucks!" the cowboy said mournfully. "Then the grist mill's wrecked. It'll worry Armstrong, but I'm shore glad you ain't hurt, Jim. And yuh must have made a real impression on the cusses when yuh smashed that charge!"

How deep the impression had been, Hatfield did not learn until the following afternoon, when he awoke from a deep sleep in the barracks at the wheat farm. A messenger from Bordentown had come and gone, leaving a sealed letter addressed to "JAMES HALD, Esq. Armstrong's Farm, Tex."

The youth who had fetched the note was a harmless lad who worked as a wrangler at a town livery stable. He had been paid to deliver it and could give no information concerning it; or who had written it. All he knew was that his boss had sent him with the missive.

CHAPTER XIII

Fat of the Land

YOUNG Steve Taylor, who handed Hatfield the epistle, sat on a bunk and watched as the Ranger, yawning as he

awakened from sleep, opened the envelope and glanced at the folded sheet of paper. The writing inside was the same fine handwriting of the invitation note he had received from Herman Wagner. This one read:

Sir: You have made a most powerful impression upon me, to say nothing of S. Boyle. I hereby extend to you a formal invitation to dine with me at ten o'clock (note that I have remembered your favorite hour) tonight. At the same spot where I first had the pleasure of meeting you. I have a most important proposition which I am sure will satisfy you. You have my personal guarantee of safety, coming and going—that is, if you really feel you need it.

Yrs. Resp'f'ly,

H. W.

Taylor caught the letter as Hatfield sailed it to him, and took a quick look at it.

"You wouldn't be fool enough to walk into a trap again, Jim!" the cowboy said.

Hatfield rose, stretching his powerful arms. He grinned at his young friend.

"Mebbe I just can't learn, Steve," he drawled. "But I don't figger this is a trap. I believe Boyle has lost his nerve for the time bein', and Wagner's feelin' panicky. Yeah, I'll be there at ten o'clock tonight."

There was much to be done during the day, much to be discussed, and new plans to be made. But through it all Jim Hatfield did not allow his evening's appointment to slip from his mind for a minute.

He and Eddie Pope left the Armstrong farm shortly after supper, but it was after nine before they entered Bordentown by a circuitous route—just in case Sling Boyle might be watching the highway.

"Looks quiet enough," observed Hatfield.

The Borden Hotel was lighted up, as usual, as were all the saloons and other places of amusement. In many private homes, too, the lamps were burning at that early hour. Strains of music could be heard, and occasionally the loud voice of some celebrant rose above it.

"Too quiet," growled Pope, his eyes rolling in suspicion. "Yuh're stickin' yore head into the panther's mouth, Hald."

They had left Steve Taylor at Armstrong's, as a guard, although the Ranger was convinced that Wagner's invitation was bona fide, and not a trap to draw him away so that another raid could be made on the wheat farmer.

"Now look here, Pope," Hatfield said, ignoring the croaking of his cowboy comrade. "You keep Goldy with yuh, savvy, like I said. Circle around slow-like, and if yuh hear me whistlin' three short blasts, turn my sorrel loose. Yuh can help me out of town, but don't get caught. I'll leave my belts and Colts looped to my saddle-horn, so's I won't have to check 'em at the bar. I got a spare gun tucked under my shirt."

The big roller mill at the end of town where the two men had paused, loomed dark in the night. Several huge drays, used to transport barrels and sacks of flour to the railroad, stood in the cobbled yard. The draught horses which drew the heavy loads were stabled for the night.

The Ranger dismounted and handed his reins to Pope.

"Yuh may have a boresome wait, feller," he said. "But I'll get back soon as possible."

"Luck," said Pope and nodded.

Hatfield crossed the plaza, moving rapidly, his eyes alert for any trouble that might arise. But none materialized, and he reached the Borden Saloon without being molested. When he went inside the place was crowded with cowboys, townsmen, and field hands from the surrounding wheat farms. Sometimes the cowmen annoyed the farmers, but

[*Turn page*]

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tonight all were good-natured. Music was being played, and dancers hopped about in the ballroom. Liquor, card games and roulette furnished amusement.

Marshall Tully lounged at the front of the bar, a drink in his hand. He glanced quickly at the tall man who entered, but seeing that the supposed wheat speculator was not armed, he only nodded. Hatfield looked around for Boyle, but did not see Sling or any of his bully boys.

"Herman Wagner here?" he asked a bartender.

"Evenin', Hald—yeah, he's upstairs in Room Twenty-two. That's up front. Waitin' for yuh, I believe."

EYES followed the tall man's progress through the crowded room. Many knew him, by sight and hearsay. He had been set up in business in town for a couple of days, and Marshal Tully as well as others in Bordentown had heard tales of his prowess.

The Ranger, spurs clinking, went up a flight of stairs and through a hall from which private rooms opened. In the front was Suite 22, sprawled across the building. It had two entrances, and one door stood ajar so the breeze could come through from open windows.

Hatfield tapped at the open door.

"Come in, come in, Hald," Wagner's hearty voice sang out. "I saw you on your way over here."

The fat man slouched in a large armchair near a long window which gave onto the balcony over the sidewalk. He wore a full dress coat with a stiff-bosomed shirt set with diamond studs, and a black tie. He was smoking a Cuban cigar, and his ugly mouth widened in a grin as he eyed his tall guest.

"My private quarters, sir," he said elaborately.

A first glance showed the large room to be empty save for the fat man. A connecting door into a bedroom stood open, and another portal, at the opposite end of the parlor, was shut. The Ranger passed to the rear of Wagner, saying, "Nice view yuh got of the town from here." By stepping close to the casement he was able to check the fact that no drygulchers lurked on the balcony.

"There's nobody out there," drawled Wagner. "I'm not such a fool as that. You're perfectly safe. Have a drink and relax."

Hatfield nodded. He poured himself a whisky and sat down near Wagner, whose lazy black eyes fixed him. The Ranger thought he could read amusement, grudging admiration, as well as a bit of apprehension in the fat chief's manner.

"You're not afraid, are you?" inquired Wagner.

"Not exactly. Just observant, that's all."

"You must change your attitude," said the fat man. "I'm willing to give you what you want."

"Yuh mean my share of the flour game?"

"Right, provided we can do business. That's fair, ain't it?"

"I reckon. But let's hear the proposition."

Wagner nodded and smiled. "If it's agreeable, suppose we dine first and get acquainted . . . Er—Boyle told me what happened at the grist mill. No doubt it was your idea to set up there, to prod me?"

"Yes, suh," Hatfield said coolly. "Told yuh I liked havin' my own way."

Another smile curled Wagner's thick lips. "The description Sling gave of the fight—you were alone out there, I think—proved that beyond the shadow of a doubt. Do you know how many men you hit before they burned you out?"

Hatfield shrugged. "They were settin' ducks, from behind cover where I was. Some of the time it was dark so I ain't shore of the exact number."

"Sixteen!" said Wagner admiringly. "Two are dead, four badly injured, the rest hurt in varying degrees, from holes in the arms and legs to bullet burns. You distinguished yourself."

"Did I wing Boyle?" Hatfield asked interestedly.

"You did. His left arm is cracked and pains him so he can't sleep. At the moment he's lyin' up in his bunk, around the corner at his quarters. Three of his men quit and the rest are demanding higher pay to fight you. Sling himself wants more money, and claims he'll need twenty additional men. I can see signs he's cracking like that arm bone of his.

"Of course, I can command any number of gunfighters. You can hire 'em by the week or month if you know where to apply. It's rather amusing to me, in a way, for Boyle was conceited about his own toughness. To see him shaken is a funny sight."

Wagner's gross stomach shook with mirth.

Hatfield waited to see what Wagner meant to prove.

"I sent for you," continued the fat boss gravely, "because I want you to work for me, Hald. It'll be cheaper in the long run than hiring human targets for you to down. Don't answer now. Let's enjoy our evening and then we'll talk further."

STEPS in the hall caused the Ranger to grow alert, and he glanced toward the open door.

"It's Curly Frye, my miller," Wagner said, "and some young ladies who are going to join us for dinner.

Three lively young women, in evening dress, bounced into the room, escorted by a stocky man in dinner clothes.

Wagner introduced Curly Frye, who was around thirty, a man with an anxious expression on his square-cut face, curly brown hair, and a flat nose. Cigar ashes had been spilled down the satin lapel of his coat. He was sloppily groomed. He shook hands with the tall fellow, and there was awe, even fear in his eyes, which shifted after a moment from the Ranger's.

The girls were young dance hall girls.

"Take your pick," whispered Wagner, nudging Hatfield.

One was a pretty little blonde, wearing a silver dress and slippers to match. She had merry eyes, a fine figure, and a wealth of golden hair piled on her trim head. Hatfield nodded toward her gravely, and Wagner immediately introduced her.

"Betty—my friend and perhaps new partner, Mr. James Hald, of the Border country. Alice, suppose you sit by me this evening. Curly, Annette will take your arm."

Betty sat on the arm of Hatfield's chair, friendly at once. Perfume filled the air, mingling with the aromatic smoke of the men's cheroots. Everybody enjoyed a round of drinks, and the talk was light, gay.

A French clock on the wall chimed ten with musical tinkles, and a door at the other side of the parlor opened.

"Dinner is served, sir," a waiter announced.

Wagner was an elegant host. The three couples moved to the well-appointed dining room. A large table with snowy white linen and gleaming silver service occupied the center of the picture. Crystal candlesticks and a glinting chandelier gave light. The windows were open, and a cool draught came through.

Expensive canapés, Russian caviar, imported delicacies were served, and there were wines to match each course. There was fish—*filet de sole*—a huge rib roast of beef, birds, chicken and turkey breasts, and partridge. Home-made rolls and various breads overflowed the platters, and Hatfield, gorging on the feast, set a record for capacity. Sweets, salted nuts, coffee, liqueurs, topped off the banquet.

The feasting lasted until nearly midnight.

CHAPTER XIV

A Fair Offer

BETTY sat close to Hatfield during dinner. She liked the big fellow, and sought to draw him out about himself. He repeated some of the story he had told Wagner and everything he said seemed to thrill the dance hall girl whose very listening attentiveness was flattering.

Frye drank until he slumped in his chair, his face a dull red. Wagner and Hatfield imbibed, but neither the fat man nor the Ranger showed the effects.

"If you ladies will excuse us now," Wagner finally said, rising and bowing gallantly, "we'll retire to smoke. I have business to discuss with Mr. Hald."

Frye was glued to his seat by the paralysis of extreme inebriation. He was staring straight ahead, unseeing.

Wagner led the way into the parlor, and offered a box of Havana cigars. The two men lighted up and sat down.

"I like men who can hold their liquor, Hald," the fat man said. "Frye can't. But he's a good miller and knows roller work. It's new to this section."

"I'm mighty interested in the mill," remarked Hatfield. "Like to look it over."

"It's a lot different from the old grist mill. Not so exciting." Wagner's eyes twinkled. "Makes better flour, however, and much more efficiently. Frye will show you around the mill whenever you care to visit it."

"Tomorrow?"

"Certainly. Just go there and tell him what you want to see."

"I'll do that."

After a time, Wagner came to the point.

"As I told you before dinner, Hald, I want you in with me. Name your price. Every man has one."

Hatfield deliberated. "I like power, Wagner. Take me in as yore pardner."

A flicker came into the fat man's eyes, and he gave a little shake of his head which quivered his jowls.

"I expect to maintain my position as leader, Hald," he said firmly. "You're asking too much."

"You got full authority, then, to deal with me? There ain't nobody else to ask if yuh make a bargain or not?"

"No one else. The others are hirelings—Frye, Boyle and so on."

"Well, I'm willin' to be a junior pardner," Hatfield said. "Subordinate to yore orders. Is that all right?"

Wagner thought it over, then he nodded. "Very well. I suppose you want a percentage rather than a salary?"

"Yeah," Hatfield agreed. "I'd rather work thataway."

"Say fifteen per cent of the net."

"How much'll that amount to?" asked the Ranger dubiously.

"In the end, a tremendous amount. This is only the start. I'm working out modes of operation, and intend to spread through the entire wheat growing country of Texas, and eventually into Kansas and Minnesota. I'll be the Flour King. Some day no one in the United States will eat a slice of bread, without us gettin' a profit."

The Ranger whistled.

"Sounds awful big. Ain't yuh mighty ambitious?"

The fat shoulders shrugged. "You've heard of Gould and Astor and Vanderbilt, haven't you? If you gain control over something which the public must have, then you can name your price. 'Cornering the market,' it's called."

"I've heard tell of it. I been a piker so far. But you give me real ideas."

"Good." Wagner looked vastly pleased. "Together we can go a long way. Just now, I need you. It's cost plenty of money to start. I'm paying Boyle and his gang, and the wheat's slow coming in, though we're operating. There's a lively market at the moment for our flour, since it's better than the ordinary mill can grind."

"I'll be in charge of the strong-arm department, then?" asked Hatfield. "But what about Sling Boyle?"

"You'll be over him. It may make him sore, but that'll be your business, won't it, Hald?"

WAGNER grinned, and Hatfield grinned back at him.

"That's right," Hatfield declared. "If he's slippin' and yeller, he's n.g. to us, Boss."

"I have other important details to attend to," Wagner went on, "and I want a man I can trust to handle such matters. That's you."

"I'm with yuh," declared Hatfield.

"Splendid. I thought we could agree, if we talked it over. You'll forgive the little settos before tonight. You can scarcely blame me, but now that we understand one another, all will go swimmingly."

"Bueno. I'll take a look-see around tomorrow, and report what I think we'll need."

Wagner nodded. "That's the ticket. Now listen carefully. In order to crush the opposition to us in this section, we must dispose of David Armstrong, the leader of the growers. He's been troublesome, as you know. I've concluded we can't win him over or scare him out. Naturally I would rather he fell into line, as the rest have or will. I'd prefer to have him deliver his wheat and take our price. That's why he's still alive tonight. But he's caused too much disturbance. The guarantee I want from you is Armstrong's death."

Hatfield met the little black eyes which pinned his. The ugly lips were pursed, and Herman Wagner had a cruel look, as he ordered the wheat grower's death.

"It's good as done," promised Hatfield. "Forget Armstrong. I'll see to the cuss."

Any attempt to hedge on his part would arouse Wagner's quick suspicions. He would lose the advantage he had worked so hard to gain.

"When Armstrong's done for, we'll sign you up as junior partner," declared Wagner. "Have another drink? A cigar?"

An hour later, Hatfield shook hands with his new boss, and went outside, to find Eddie Pope. The waddy was not far off, with Goldy. Hatfield strapped on his gun-belts, and they rode off for a short distance, as the Ranger retailed the highlights of his night's work.

"Go back to Armstrong's, Pope," he instructed then, "and tell 'em I said to lie low till they hear from me. I'm stickin' in town, but I hope to make the farm late tomorrow, prob'ly after dark."

"It ain't safe for yuh here," protested young Pope.

"It is for a while. Me'n Wagner are pards,

believe it or not. With Sling Boyle laid up and his men feelin' weak-kneed, Armstrong don't have to worry for a spell."

"Listen," said the cowboy, "if Wagner finds out you're cold-deckin' him, we won't be able to find a shred of yore hide, Jim."

Pope grumbled some more at leaving him, but finally obeyed. He had had a tiresome wait in the darkness, while Hatfield had been enjoying Wagner's supper party.

The Ranger went to a livery stable, which kept open day and night, and put up Goldy. He slept in a nearby shed, his saddle for a pillow.

The excitement, the rich food and drink, the plans he was working on to smash Wagner and the enemies of Texas, kept him awake for a time.

"I need fightin' men," he thought, as he lay in the darkness, looking up at a crack in the shrunken roof, through which he could see a shining star. "Boyle's still got plenty of hombres and can hire all he wants. I'll have to pick up a tough crew to sweep his up right."

Then he drifted off, his steady nerves allowing him to sleep even in the heart of danger. For he was in danger, liable to instant death if Herman Wagner ever suspected his true motive in joining the outlaw firm. . . .

IN THE morning the stores were opening as Hatfield strolled up State Street. He stopped at a clothing emporium and a pair of whipcord riding breeches caught his eye. There was a silk shirt to match the light-tan of the trousers.

"Big operator like yores truly ought to dress the part," he told himself. "I'll outshine Sling Boyle!"

He bought the outfit and a new kerchief, and carried them to the big barber shop up the line. He had his hair cut, enjoyed a real shave, and paid a dollar for use of the tin tub in a rear room. The Negro attendant filled it with warm water and the bath was refreshing. He felt like a colt after he had dried himself on the clean, rough towel and donned his handsome new outfit.

Smelling like a sachet after the barber had got through with him, the tall officer hurried to the Texas Lunch. A fluttering waitress managed, between palpitations of the heart at sight of the rugged young man, to bring him a platter of fried ham and eggs and a pot of steaming coffee. There was corn pone, butter, and syrup, and after he had filled himself up, and was rolling a quirly, life seemed perfect.

It was most certainly interesting, the way of a Ranger. There were few dull moments, and Hatfield had a daring nature which demanded excitement, danger.

Stetson cocked on his head, cigarette between his lips, he walked south on State Street, his high heels clicking, spurs jingling on the board sidewalk. It promised to be another hot day, but as yet the sun had not gained full power, and the breeze was cooling.

Smoke, black smoke from burning coal in the furnaces which turned the water to steam, issued from the tall stack of the MM Milling Company's factory. Two box-wagons, driven by wheat growers, were just coming in at one side, where a loading platform ran the length of the building.

Three large drays, with six horses hitched to each, in pairs, had been backed to the other end of the platform, and men in leather aprons and caps, white with flour, were rolling heavy barrels out to load on the flat wagons.

Hatfield went around to the front, where there was a door marked "Office." Inside sat a girl, who took his name in to someone inside.

"Mr. Frye will see you right away, sir," she said when she returned.

She had a smile for the tall man.

CHAPTER XV

Blood Guarantee

FRYE was seated at his desk, his feet up. He was slumped in his chair. He offered Hatfield an apprehensive, sickly grin, and licked his lips.

"Howdy, Hald. Glad yuh come over. Boy, I wish I felt as good as you look! My head's fit to bust."

He had drunk too much the night before and his tongue was like flannel in his mouth. He opened a desk drawer, took out a flask, and offered the Ranger a drink, but the caller shook his head.

"Too early for me, Frye," he objected.

"Never too early, never too late, that's my motto." Frye took a long drink.

Curly Frye was a good miller, but his

appetite for strong drink had lost him many jobs. That was one reason he had been willing to come in with Wagner, who so far had made allowances for his failings.

"I'd like to see the mill mighty well, Curly," Hatfield suggested.

Frye got to his feet. "All right. I'll take yuh through.

There was a steady, dull humming, of working machinery, which shook the building. Frye led the Ranger through a side door, down a short hall, and into the mill proper. It was filled with dust.

Wheat from the box-wagons was dumped into a hopper outside and by gravity fed into the first of the machines. Hatfield indicated a part of one of them.

"What's that?" he inquired.

"Sieves. Wheat has to be cleaned of foreign matter and other grains, first of all. Them sieves are different sizes and they pick and choose anything larger or smaller than wheat, and of the wrong shape."

Watching the workmen running the grain through, Hatfield followed Frye. Big rollers, gleaming white where the flour and chaff had not stuck, crushed the wheat. Frye had to raise his voice, close to Hatfield's ear, to explain.

"Porcelain rollers, see? Latest thing in millin'. They're grooved in various ways so's yuh get the degree of fineness yuh want."

"Semolina, middlin's and dunst," said the Ranger, remembering what Armstrong had told him.

Frye nodded. "Dunst is the name we give the finest stage. It's free of bran and fluff."

At the end of the line, the finished product, handled by automatic scoops, which roused the Ranger's instant admiration by their ingenious machine intelligence, was stowed in new barrels. A cooper sealed them, and laborers rolled them through the wide door to the platform and onto the waiting drays.

In a small annex was the furnace which was stoked with soft coal. It heated the big boiler and created steam, the power to run the milling machinery. Curly Frye, when it came to his work, was intelligent. He knew all the latest wrinkles on flour production, and explained the various processes to Hatfield.

Back in Frye's private office when the tour of the mill was completed, Hatfield sat down and fixed himself a smoke.

"Yuh got a nice plant here and mighty interestin'," he observed. "Where are them drays bound? For the railroad?"

Past the window two of the great flat wagons Hatfield pointed out were rolling, piled high with barrels of flour. Upright staves stuck into holes in the wagon bed, and lashed ropes, kept the barrels from falling off. Heavy horses strained at the load.

"That's right," Curly said. "We got plenty orders and more comin' in."

"Yuh gettin' enough wheat, though?"

Frye grimaced. "That's the trouble. We're runnin' at a quarter capacity. I could turn out four-five times what we're makin' now, if them cussed growers would deliver. Wagner says it's Armstrong's fault, that the growers are holdin' their grain for higher prices. Some of 'em have slowed their harvest. And I understand this Armstrong cuss is the one who's encouragin' 'em."

"That's where I come in." Hatfield chuckled. "I'm goin' after him, and in a few days all the wheat in the section'll be in yore elevators, Curly."

"I hope so," Frye sighed. "I'm workin' on percentage. We figgered it'd be a cinch to scare these farmers, but opposition's built up."

Frye blinked at the tall man, suddenly remembering that it was Hatfield's appearance in the wheat country which had shaken Wagner's gang, and Frye was in awe of the supposed ally's prowess.

"I'm goin' after Armstrong tonight," promised the Ranger. "Nobody'll ever see the sidewinder again, or I'm a—"

HE TURNED quickly as the door into the anteroom opened. Sling Boyle stood there. He scowled at Hatfield, but then nodded briefly and came limping into the office. His swollen left arm was bandaged between wrist and elbow, and carried in his silk kerchief, which made an admirable sling.

"'Mornin', Curly," he greeted. "Hello, Hald."

"Howdy, Sling. Sorry to see yuh ain't feelin' so well."

Boyle's waxed black mustache twitched. His eyes were smoking, for he could not hide his hate and fear of the man who had bested him and the gunnies he commanded. But he tried to, for he had had his orders from Herman Wagner, and he was none too eager for another brush with the supposed speculator who had forced his way into the combine.

Sling sat down, careful not to jar his cracked arm.

"Roll me a smoke, will you, Curly? I never was much good at it with one hand."

Frye fixed a cigarette for Boyle, and Hatfield struck a match and held it for the gunslick.

"Wagner says you're takin' over the job of finishin' Armstrong," Boyle remarked. "Says I'm to give yuh whatever help yuh want. I seen yuh come in here and figgered it was a good place to pow-wow. Let me know what yuh need."

"Gracias." The Ranger nodded. "The first thing to do is get rid of Armstrong. That ought to be simple—for me. They savvy you, but they still think I'm their friend, for I played up to 'em to force you fellers to take me in. I can ride right up to Armstrong's and take care of him, alone."

"How about them two cowhands, Pope and Taylor, that are smellin' around there all the time?" asked Boyle.

"They ain't always on hand. Armstrong moves out into the fields now and then, and it'll be a cinch. Wagner told me to get Armstrong as a guarantee and I aim to bring it off pronto."

Boyle nodded. He accepted a drink from Frye's flask. As the gunslick leaned forward, Hatfield saw the butt of the hidden Colt under his silk shirt. Boyle was still dangerous, for he was right-handed and a quick man with a pistol.

But Boyle tried to hide his feeling against Hatfield.

"I was thinkin' of ridin' up to Amarillo and fetchin' back a fresh bunch of boys," he said. "We could use a few more."

"Hold it a day or two, till I have a looksee," advised Hatfield. "Mebbe we won't need to go to the expense. With Armstrong gone, the rest may give up."

Boyle looked sour, but did not argue.

"I'll lie around, then, till my arm's better," he said. "Pains me so I can't sleep nights."

"Tough. I'm shore sorry, Sling, we didn't get to be friends sooner."

Sling was not certain whether or not the tall fellow was laughing at him. He concealed his dislike as best he could, and took his leave soon after, saying he was going home to lie down.

Hatfield had lunch at the Bordentown Hotel, and then took a siesta in the shade behind the livery stable.

He did not see Herman Wagner that day. The chief remained in his rooms at the hotel. Around five o'clock, Hatfield saddled the sorrel. He checked his weapons and, needing more shells, rode over to the hardware store on State Street and purchased two boxes. The sun was over the Staked Plain as he hit the road westward.

Dark had fallen when he turned into Armstrong's lane.

"Wonder if Boyle and Wagner have had me trailed?" he mused.

But he did not believe they could be suspicious yet, for they must think he had worked in with Armstrong, and would use that to his advantage if his intentions toward the gang were bona fide. He had seen no signs that he was being tracked, at a distance, but it was possible.

THE family had finished supper but Mrs. Armstrong and Florrie gladly prepared a special meal for Hatfield. The whole family, as well as Taylor and Pope gathered about him as he ate and told some of what had occurred in town.

Later, Hatfield held a conference with Dave Armstrong, Eddie Pope and Steve Taylor.

"Wagner's fooled for the moment," Hatfield informed them. "I've pretended to fall in with his gang. The price I'm to pay is yore death, Armstrong, and I've sworn I'll deliver."

They stared at him, without speaking.

"I need a few days more, to organize a fightin' band which can shorely crush Wagner. Boyle's determined to fetch in more gunslicks. If I'm in with 'em, it'll be that much easier to trap the hull shebang, savvy? Save lives of possemen. So we must fix up a good trick, to convince 'em that you've been killed, Armstrong."

"How yuh expect to do it?" demanded Taylor.

"I got a plan sort of worked out. Armstrong can't stay here till we've smashed Wagner, for his death has been ordered. Before this, they were tryin' to scare yuh into line, Dave, but Wagner's patience has cracked and he's determined to kill yuh. Yuh could be picked off by a drygulcher with a long-range rifle any time while yuh moved around the farm.

"So here's what we'll do. I'll fire a couple pistol shots outside, and pretend to grab Dave and tie him up. Steve, you and Eddie raise a hullabaloo, shoot yore Colts and yell.

The women can screech if they've a mind to. I got a feelin' I've been follered here. Some of them killers may be lurkin' outside in the darkness at this moment. If Wagner trusts me, Sling Boyle don't."

"Then what?" inquired Armstrong.

"I'll take yuh through the wheat, and hide yuh at Johnny Ort's Dotted Circle. Yore wife and Florrie can cry around and yuh'll send a man into town with the news that Armstrong's body was found in the wheat. Run a buryin' party, with a box and all, and make a grave on the hill over there behind the house."

"S'pose we manage to fool 'em," said Taylor. "Where yuh expect to get the men to smash Wagner and Boyle, 'specially if they fetch in a new gang of gunnies? The town marshals won't move outside their jurisdiction, and like I told yuh, the county sheriff's an old fool. He was over here once, like Dave says, but he's got to have sworn papers and witnesses and all kinds of things before he'll lift a toenail. Wagner's slippery and he's rich. It's no cinch to pin such an hombre in court."

"That's why I need a few days," declared Hatfield. "I'll have to ride mebbe fifty, sixty miles to pick up the right men, get 'em together, and fetch 'em back to Bordentown. If Wagner's convinced I shot Armstrong, that'll be easy. I can say I'm makin' a survey or goin' after confederates, like Boyle wants to."

Armstrong watched the grim face of the Ranger. The wheat grower was not entirely convinced.

"I hate to run away, Hald," he objected. "I've stuck it out so far. I'm not afraid now."

"Mebbe not, Armstrong. But I don't intend to have yuh picked off. Yuh don't carry a gun and yuh'll be meat for any of Boyle's devils who wants to creep up on yuh. . . . Now listen! I'm in a hurry. We must work this while the night lasts, so we'll start now."

Steve Taylor was embarrassed. He did not enjoy seeing his friend and Armstrong disagree.

"I don't see how you'll be able to bring enough men in to defeat Boyle and Wagner," Armstrong insisted. "They've got a powerful bunch."

There was a stubborn set to the wheat grower's jaw. It was obvious that Armstrong did not want to follow the Ranger's plan.

CHAPTER XVI

Texas Ranger

JIM HATFIELD reached inside his shirt. From the secret pocket he took his Ranger star, emblem of the mighty organization of which he was a shining example. Taylor and Pope knew what it was instantly, as he held it to the light and the badge caught the rays, scintillating brightly in their eyes.

"My right name's Jim Hatfield," said the tall man.

"Texas Ranger!" yelped Taylor.

"Cuss my hide!" cried Pope. "So that's it!"

Now Armstrong realized the big fellow's true position.

"You're from Austin?" he asked. "I wrote a complaint to the Rangers."

"We got it, and that's why I come. I can command help from all true citizens, and my orders go. Come on, Armstrong, we're pullin' out. That's official now."

Dave Armstrong rose with alacrity.

"Whatever you say, goes, Ranger," he said steadily.

Pope went to saddle a horse for Armstrong, and Taylor left to explain to Mrs. Armstrong and Florrie.

In the darknes of the yard, once they were prepared, Hatfield raised his revolver and fired into the air. Armstrong gave a convincing shriek of agony, while at the house his wife, Dolly, and daughter, Florrie, set up shrill cries of alarm.

Pope, Taylor and the boys dashed forth. The cowboys began shooting into the night, keeping their gun muzzles high, whooping it up.

Many of Armstrong's workers had deserted the farm after Boyle's attacks, but the few who remained rushed from the barracks. They were unaware of the ruse and gave a splendid performance.

Hatfield, with Armstrong slumped in the saddle of his horse as though injured, was in the shadows, starting into the wheat fields west of the buildings. A line of brush and short trees made a black stripe along the river.

The Ranger wished to keep off the roads. He still was not certain, but he suspected that Sling Boyle might have come out to

make sure of what happened at the farm. The play which had been enacted should deceive Sling and his men.

Hatfield and Armstrong rode through the wheat for some miles before they crossed the winding stream. The Ranger looked back often, pausing as he sought to determine whether by any chance his enemies might be after them, but could spy not the slightest sign that he was being followed or observed.

At the western limits of the wheat fields, they crossed Ort's fence, and moved over the shadowy range. The moon was well up by now.

It was after three in the morning when they reached the Dotted Circle, the buildings bulking black in the night. The Ranger, his badge pinned to his shirt, knocked on the rancher's door.

STEVE TAYLOR

After a time the sleepy-eyed Ort appeared, a shotgun in one hand.

"What in blazes!" he began. The candlelight he carried flickered in the faint wind. The yellow light showed the Ranger star, and Ort gulped on his complaints. "A Ranger! So yuh're one, huh?"

It took a few minutes to explain. Ort did not fancy farmers and he had had trouble with Armstrong, but this was a matter of life and death, and the rancher nodded, offering his hand to the wheat grower.

"You stick here, Armstrong," he said. "Yuh're welcome. Come on—I'll show yuh where yuh can sleep."

"Lie low, Armstrong," warned Hatfield, "till yuh hear from me. I'll work as fast as I can."

Hatfield knew that Ort would assist the Rangers, although he had but a handful of riders.

Hatfield needed a larger crew, to make sure of his outlaw prey. He returned his Ranger star to its hiding place, and rode off, headed for Bordentown. If Sling Boyle or any of his henchmen were around, the officer did not see them as he cut in from the southwest after passing Armstrong's lane and galloped swiftly on the road to Wagner's stronghold.

When he arrived in Bordentown, the town seemed peaceful in the fresh morning quiet. The saloons were empty, and only a few early risers moved about. One was the owner of the Texas Lunch and Hatfield enjoyed a hearty breakfast.

Then he went to get some sleep, after caring for Goldy, for he had been on the go all night.

He wanted news of Armstrong's death to come in from a source other than himself before he reported to Wagner.

AFTER the heat of the day had passed, Hatfield awoke, washed up, and had some coffee. Then he went over to the Borden House and had a drink at the bar. Curly Frye came in, for the mill had closed for the day.

He nodded and smiled, and joined the Ranger.

"Seen Sling around?" inquired Jim Hatfield of him.

"Not today," replied Frye. "Lyin' up, I reckon."

He was preoccupied with getting several drinks of red-hot whisky under his belt. When he had downed three glasses in quick gulps, he felt better.

"The boss come to the mill after dinner," he said then. "Did yuh hear the news?"

"What news?"

Frye kept his voice down. "They found Dave Armstrong's body lyin' in the wheat. All shot up, they say. Had a fun'ral and all and buried him on his farm. Mebbe the cuss won't pull our ears no more. He's been a nuisance, keepin' his friends from sellin' us their wheat."

An elegant equipage drew up before the hotel. The fat Herman Wagner rolled out of it and gallantly raised a pugdy hand, glinting with diamond rings, to assist a fair lady to the carriage block and thence to the

wooden sidewalk. Her dainty, silk-clad ankle peeped forth as she lifted the skirt of her bustled dress to keep from tripping, and the loafers on the wooden benches outside nearly popped out their eyes.

"Oh, you kid!" called a bolder spirit, and Wagner scowled, as in high dignity he offered his arm to his escort.

They came in at the hotel entry, and Hatfield, in the bar, saw them as they passed by the wide inner doorway which led from the lobby to the bar.

Allowing Wagner time to leave the lady and get to his rooms, Hatfield went up the main staircase. He kept wondering where Sling Boyle might be. Things were too quiet.

When the tall man entered Wagner's rooms, the fat man had removed his coat and was lounging in his favorite easy chair, with a drink at his side. He nodded and seemed pleased, glad to see his young partner.

"I hear you brought it off, Hald. Good work."

" 'Twas a cinch," boasted Hatfield. "I rode right up to the farm. After supper I caught Armstrong in the yard and there was nothin' to it. Throwed him in the wheat."

Wagner was satisfied. "I intend to seize his farm, one way or another. It'll bring in a handsome profit. The wheat should start comin' in to the mill now, with Armstrong out of the way."

"And our agreement?" asked Hatfield. "How about that?"

"No hurry. We'll take care of it tomorrow. Pour yourself a drink."

Hatfield thought that Wagner had been fooled, that the fat boss was sure of Armstrong's death. But he felt an instinctive warning of danger and kept asking himself where Boyle might be.

He was close to the dread chief, the obese Wagner who had brought such woe upon this part of Texas. But Wagner had great power of life and death. Hatfield was alone at the moment, and there were many enemies to contend with.

There was always the chance of a slip. If Boyle somehow managed to track Armstrong to the Dotted Circle, it would mean death to Ranger Jim Hatfield, and calamity for all concerned. . . .

Back at the Armstrong wheat farm, Steve Taylor had taken part in David Armstrong's mock funeral, and he had admired the play-acting of Florrie and her mother, both of whom wept copiously and behaved as though the husband and father were really dead. The field hands believed it to be so, and when Taylor and Pope had come in with the simple pine box supposed to contain the remains, a grave had been dug on the hill and the coffin interred.

Warned by Hatfield, Taylor was well aware they might be observed by field-glasses or telescope from a distance, and they all put on a convincing show.

Taylor hung around the farm with Florrie the rest of the day. Friends, hearing of Armstrong's death, had come to call, other growers who had looked to Dave as their leader. The news had been carried quickly to Bordentown.

BUT Florrie and her mother were worried about Armstrong. "Steve," the girl said, after supper that night, "you ought to be with Dad. I wish you'd stay by him out there, just to make sure."

"But Florrie, I don't like to leave you and yore ma," Steve protested.

"We're safe enough," Florrie assured. "They won't hurt us. It's Dad they're after."

"They believe he's dead."

"Do they? They must be spying on us or Jim wouldn't have had us go through all that rigamarole. Ugh! It gave me the shivers. I kept thinking Father was in that box, even though I knew he wasn't."

Florrie adored Armstrong. Taylor knew it would crush her to lose her father.

"Mother and I think that Eddie and you should stay out there with Dad," she insisted. "Just in case."

"But—"

Half an hour later, in the night, Pope and Taylor quietly saddled up, sneaked away from the farm, and moved through the wheat fields toward Ort's.

They found Dave Armstrong safe, but bored. He had remained in the house all day, and only after dark had he taken a short stroll in the yard.

Taylor kept wondering about his friend, the big Ranger. He admired Hatfield more than any man he had ever met.

"If anybody can smash Wagner, Jim can do it," he thought, as he lay in his bunk that night.

In the morning, Pope and Taylor worked around the ranch. They saw Armstrong now and then, as the wheat grower looked from a window or door of Ort's house.

Wishing to ride a bit and to exercise his

favorite mustang, Taylor saddled up, intending to circle the ranch for an hour's run. On the rolling Panhandle plain he would be able to spy any approaching riders, in case attackers moved on the Dotted Circle.

CHAPTER XVII

The Slip

VEERING between Ort's and the wheat fields, Steve Taylor was a half mile out, when the sun scintillated with flaring intensity on something to the southeast of his position.

"Sun on glass, looked like," he muttered uneasily.

He had not forgotten what Hatfield had said about the enemy watching with field-glasses or telescope. A brightly polished gun barrel would catch the sun that way, too.

He rode toward the spot, watching intently. There were some dry gullies, made by rain run-offs, and red rocks sticking up. Coming up on a slight rise, he was able to see several saddled horses standing, reins on the ground, near the rocks.

Something that sounded like a giant hornet whizzed past his head. He turned, zigzagging, as he galloped back toward Ort's. There was a clear field of vision from the spot where the men and horses were to the Dotted Circle buildings, snugged close to the ground, in the distance.

Looking back over his shoulder, Taylor saw half a dozen men emerge from hiding, leap on their mustangs, and gallop off toward the Bordentown pike. One had a bandaged arm in a white sling which stood out against his dark silk shirt.

"Looks like Sling Boyle!" thought the excited waddy.

He watched them go, dust rising from the beating hoofs of their horses, then he returned to the ranch.

Dave Armstrong was sitting in a chair on the veranda which faced the east. Taylor glanced back. He could see the darker area where the red rocks stuck up.

"By gee, with a good glass they could have recognized yuh, Dave!" he cried.

"Who?" asked the wheat grower. It had been hard to convince Armstrong he was marked for sure death, hard to keep him in hand.

"Boyle and some of his men have been spyin' on us here! Had a telescope out there and mebbe seen yuh on the veranda! Yuh should have stayed inside."

"It was so hot," complained Armstrong. "I didn't think there'd be any harm in getting a breath of air."

Taylor hunted up Johnny Ort and related what he had seen.

"Yeah?" said Ort, when he had heard the story. "You reckon Boyle seen him from out there?"

"I'm shore of it. They'll kill Hatfield now, shoot him before he can put up a scrap! How about it, Johnny? Let's take all the boys yuh got and head for town. We can't let the Ranger down."

"Huh! Six men are out on the north run. It'll take a couple of hours to reach 'em!"

Ort was not as certain of Hatfield's danger as Taylor was.

"I'm goin' in alone, then, and try to warn him!" shouted Steve.

Ort shrugged. "I'll send Pope out to call the boys. Take time, though."

"No time to fool. I'm leavin'! Now!"

He hurried back to Armstrong. "No use to stick here any longer Dave, now they've spotted you. Soon as it's dark, saddle up and stay in the wheat as yuh make for home. Only don't show yoreself—please!"

Steve Taylor was in a dither of alarm. The more he thought of it, the more the cold sweat came out on him. Hatfield was in town, no doubt at enemy headquarters, and alone.

"Where you bound?" sang out Eddie Pope, as Taylor hit leather.

"Bordentown! I got to find the Ranger. Boyle's spied Armstrong, and it's a dead giveaway."

"Dead is the word! They'll make a sieve of Jim!"

Taylor nodded, his young lips grim. "Boyle hates Hatfield for woundin' him and takin' his job. He's hoped to catch Jim—and this is fatal. Reckon Boyle figgered Armstrong would be here, if he wasn't dead, on account of me workin' for Ort."

"Wait a jiffy!" yelped Eddie Pope. "I'll ride with yuh."

It did not take him long to saddle a fresh mustang, sling his carbine, and join his friend. They started for town, but did not dare stay on the road, for Boyle knew that Taylor had seen him and undoubtedly would have the pike watched.

IT WAS night when Steve Taylor and Eddie Pope came up on the settlement from the south. They had made it by a roundabout route. Lights blazed from the saloons and homes.

Taylor dismounted, away from the lighted areas.

"You stick with the hosses, Eddie," he said, in a low voice. "I'm sneakin' in. Want to find the Ranger, without wreckin' him, savvy?"

"All right. But watch yore hide."

Steve Taylor had not much concealment to choose from. The big flour mill was near at hand, and it was dark. He reached it, and moved along the dark side to the loading platform. He wanted to find Hatfield without getting disabled himself, or making more trouble for his Ranger friend.

There were men on the sidewalk in front of the Borden Hotel. Some were loafers, or chatting townsmen. Others were strangers, armed fellows he had never seen before.

He ducked across a street and walked swiftly up a narrow byway which was not much frequented, paused at the corner, and looked across the plaza to the hotel. Horses stood in the gutter, reins on the hitchrack. There were many people about.

"Boyle couldn't have been too far ahead of us," he thought.

The open windows of the rooms on the second floor, up front, blazed with light. Wagner's quarters.

Taylor's eyes flicked from the sidewalk to the balcony and back. He was trying to decide on his next move, how to find Hatfield and give him a warning.

Music was in the air and the cries of celebrants, the usual sounds of the city.

Then with ear-splitting suddenness, gunshots roared out in the hotel. The cursing, frantic Taylor, knowing it must be what he feared, gripped his Colt, cocked it, and tore across the plaza.

As he ran, his high-heeled boots making clumsy racing shoes, everything seemed to happen at once. At the sound of the shooting, men on the street split off, ducking for cover. Customers in the saloon milled about at the main doors. A figure showed, framed black against one of the long windows of Wagner's suite. Colts banged heavily.

"That's Hatfield!" panted Taylor, sure it was the Ranger.

The man who had jumped out on the balcony turned, firing into the room from which he had come. He paused but an instant, however, then vaulted over the railing and landed in the street below, narrowly missing a saddled horse.

Some of the men who had been on the sidewalk had ducked under the railing and started into the dusty street. They were drawing their guns.

Taylor had almost reached the spot. His heart ached as he saw that the tall man who had made the long jump from the balcony did not rise. The cowboy threw up his pistol and opened fire, to rattle the killers in the street.

It was confusing, as Taylor was aware of flashing Colts. More enemies had crowded onto the balcony and were hanging over the rail, guns in hand, trying for a shot at their victim. With a curse, Taylor raised his gun muzzle and fired a couple of slugs which sent them back. One of them, cut by the lead, began yelling.

His fire annoyed those below. Because of the dancing mustangs, only a couple had a clear bead on the Ranger, for Taylor knew now that it was his friend who lay in the road.

"Hold that!" bellowed Taylor, charging on.

With intense joy, he saw Hatfield moving, rolling off, coming up on his knee. And the Ranger still gripped a Colt!

Then Steve Taylor went down. He felt the whip of the slug, but he was unconscious when he hit the dusty street. . . .

WHEN Steve Taylor awoke, he was lying on the floor in a building which was strange to him. Sling Boyle stood over him, glowering, and there were about a dozen more armed gunnies in the place. Taylor's head ached, but he knew he was not bady hurt. There was blood on his cheek, which had run from a scalp crease he had received in the fight.

Boyle, his left arm still useless, was smoking a cigarette. When he saw Taylor's eyes were open, he knelt down by the cowboy.

"Who's the big hombre, Taylor?" he demanded. "Is he a law officer? What's his game? What's he aim to do?"

Taylor, though dismayed that he himself was a prisoner, felt relieved that Hatfield had escaped, for he guessed from Boyle's questions that they had failed to take the Ranger. Had they killed or captured the officer, they would have found the telltale silver star on silver circle.

"Answer me, yuh young lobo!" snarled Boyle, and pressed the red-hot end of his cigarette into Taylor's cheek.

It burned frightfully and Taylor winced, swearing as he tried to punch Sling. Men jumped in, kicked him in the stomach and nose and held him down.

The place was some sort of barracks. There were bunks and bedrolls around, the belongings of many men.

"Go to thunder!" gasped Steve.

They knew how to torture, how to hurt. Boyle was in a furious, yet grimly triumphant mood. He had proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that his tall rival was not to be trusted by Wagner. Now all that remained was to kill the imposter. They already had Taylor, and it would be simple to shoot Dave Armstrong. The game would be won.

"Talk! Tell me the truth! Yuh'll die in a jiffy, so yuh might as well not die lyin'!"

Boyle, teeth clenched and mustache bristling, pushed the glowing cigarette at Taylor's eyes!

CHAPTER XVIII

Backlash

GRIMLY the Ranger, Colt in hand, whirled the golden sorrel as he heard his name shouted. But even as instinct reacted at the challenge, he recognized Eddie Pope's voice.

"Hatfield!"

"Pope! What are you doin' here? Where's Taylor?"

"He's there!" Pope pointed toward the settlement which was ablaze with lights. Bordentown was boiling with enemies, armed gunmen hunting for the tall officer. "I got his hoss here."

Hatfield swore. Blood was oozing from a bullet gash in his right thigh, and his left shoulder felt numb, where he had landed on it when he had vaulted the balcony rail in making his desperate escape. Gravel and dirt had ground into the scraped flesh of his forearms and one cheek.

"Somethin' went awful sour," growled Hatfield, his eyes glowing. "I was up in Wagner's rooms, when Boyle and a bunch of hombres I didn't savvy burst in. Reckon he sent for 'em to Amarillo on his own. I could tell by the gleam in Sling's eye he was on to my game, and I used Wagner for a shield to make the window. There was more gunslingers below, waitin' for me. The jolt from the jump dazed me a bit and they'd have got me if somebody on the plaza hadn't started shootin'. That give me the moments I needed to pull myself together."

"That was Steve!" cried Pope, agony in his voice. "They've killed him, I reckon!"

After Jim Hatfield recovered from the jump he had made from Wagner's balcony, he had made a frantic dash for safety. Mustangs, dancing at the racks, the bulk of the Borden Hotel's porch, and other obstacles between him and the would-be killers had helped him when he had scrambled across the sidewalk and by way of a passage had reached the back avenue. He had earlier taken the precaution of leaving Goldy saddled and at a spot where the sorrel could get free to answer his whistles. Running fast, but limping on his bleeding leg, the Ranger had gritted his teeth and kept going until the gelding had trotted to him.

Now he turned Goldy in the road and started away.

"Where yuh goin'?" demanded Pope.

"Back there to find out what's happened to Steve," Hatfield said determinedly.

"It's shore death! He may be finished and if he ain't, where yuh expect to find him?"

Pope was talking sense, and Hatfield knew it. The waddy was fonder of Taylor than of anyone else in the world, but bravery was one thing, and foolhardy, useless sacrifice another. Hatfield had put the fear of himself into Boyle and the old gang. But the new members, brought from Amarillo, would be brash and come at him, and bullets felt no fear.

"In case they ain't killed Steve, I believe they'll take him to Boyle's quarters," the Ranger said. "It's around the corner from the hotel, and the gunnies hang out there when they're in town. Keeps Wagner's nose clean, not to have 'em at the hotel."

Speed was important now, the Ranger knew, if he was to save Steve Taylor. He must not waste a moment, so he sharply interrupted Eddie Pope who, with emotion making him garrulous, was telling how it had all come about, how Armstrong had been spied by Boyle at the Dotted Circle, of Taylor's worry over Hatfield, and the attempt to warn the Ranger.

"I'm goin' to try for it!" snapped Hatfield. "Come on!"

"You're right!" cried Eddie anxiously.

If there was one chance in a thousand of saving Taylor, they must take it, and must not think of the danger to self in making the try.

As Jim Hatfield circled the city, with Pope at his side, he rapidly checked possibilities in his mind. The town marshal and his deputies might give a hand. But it would take time to prove a case, and by then Taylor might be dead. Besides, Wagner had tremendous influence, and even before the Ranger could locate Tully and his deputies, Boyle's men would either see him or be told of his presence, and would be out to gun him down.

"We'll be better off to try it alone, Pope," the Ranger finally said, when he had told the waddy what he was thinking. "There's a back way to Boyle's quarters, and we'll fetch the hosses in close. I'll see what's what when we get there. It's the logical spot for 'em to take Taylor if he ain't already dead."

THERE were riders in town, on the plaza and streets, still hunting the elusive Ranger. The black bulk of houses and sheds, shadows here and there, were a shield for Hatfield as he made his way back into town.

He stopped behind a low board fence which separated the yard in which he stood from the rear of Boyle's home, a rectangular, unpainted structure on a street which ran into State near the Bordentown Hotel. Lights showed in Boyle's windows which were open to the summer night.

"Keep the hosses quiet, Eddie," whispered Hatfield to Pope, who was shaking with excitement and anxiety. "And be ready to cover me when I start out."

Pope nodded. He had already tied a bandanna around the muzzle of Taylor's mustang, which had a bad habit of whinnying when unattended.

"Luck," he breathed.

Hatfield was already over the low barrier. He could see armed men up at the road. The blank wall of a small warehouse was at his right, and to the left was the den where the gunmen foregathered.

Crouched, ignoring the pain in his leg and the smarting abrasions on his arms and face, he peeked through a window. The room was a kitchen, with a wood stove, table and chairs, a sink with a hand pump, provisions, bottles and other equipment. The kitchen was empty now, and a small lamp on the sideboard was turned low.

The main room into which he next looked was fitted with bunks and bedrolls, saddles and packs. Spare clothing hung on hooks or had been thrown on the floor. There was a lamp on a table, and another in a wall bracket. A dozen men were in the room, and Sling Boyle was squatting over a prostrate figure.

As Sling thrust a burning cigarette into his victim's cheek, shifting his position a bit, Hatfield recognized Steve Taylor as the man who was being tortured.

"Come on—talk!" Boyle was saying. "Yuh ain't got long, Taylor, so tell the truth."

Taylor was moaning, jerking each time he was prodded or burned. One of the men, a grinning, wide-bodied devil with a distorted face, was drawing a cigar along Taylor's forehead, close to his eyes. Hatfield had not seen this fellow before and concluded he must be one of Boyle's new recruits from Amarillo.

Taylor lay about ten feet from the nearest window.

There was no time to lose. Some of the men already had guns up and cocked. And at any instant Boyle might kill Steve Taylor.

Down low, keeping a watch on the men in the lighted street, the Ranger moved toward the front of Boyle's house. Going as far as he dared, he raised his Colt and opened fire, smashing the main lamp in the room with one shot, and the bracket light with the next.

Leaping up, he dashed back to the last window of the big room and dived through.

Howls filled the place, and the men were surging toward the opening through which the Ranger had been shooting. A faint light came from the half-open kitchen doorway. Hatfield knew where Taylor lay and keeping down as he leaped to him, he threw the cowboy across his left shoulder. The weight pained him dreadfully but he had to keep his Colt in his hand as he backed out.

Somebody fired a shot but it was not in Hatfield's direction. An itchy trigger finger had fired blindly as the man with the gun saw a member of the gang outside peek in the window, having run in from the street. Curses, a screech of pain, and Boyle's anger-shrill voice filled the room.

Hatfield was at the kitchen door when Boyle happened to look back and see him disappear. Sling set up a yelp like a hound who had just sighted its quarry. He sent

hasty slugs after the Ranger but Hatfield had turned aside, toward the window. As he went by, Hatfield smashed the kitchen lamp with his Colt barrel, and shoved Taylor outside, following instantly, watching for the gunnies in the alley.

HE HOISTED Taylor up again, as Steve, out on his feet, muttered groggily.

The fence was black. The killers could not see Hatfield against it, so he had a breath's start. He reached the barrier and hoisted Taylor over into Pope's waiting arms.

"Put him in the saddle, loop him there and start!" gasped Hatfield.

"There they go!" shrieked a man who was pounding in from the street.

He had been glimpsed as he topped the fence. He turned to fire at his pursuers, and answering bullets drove through the fence, breaking out long splinters, or whizzed in the air.

Hatfield was moving fast. He hit leather without touching the stirrup, and started after Pope, who was leading Taylor's mustang as he retreated.

When they emerged on the next road, some of the gunnies had reached the corner, and were rushing toward them. Colts opened up, as the fleeing trio crossed the street. Taylor was half-out, but was gripping the saddle-horn and trying to talk.

"Keep quiet and hold on, Steve!" snapped Pope.

They were not out of it yet. Boyle had ordered his rattled men to get their horses, and the killers were mounting. More of them galloped from other parts of town to the center of the disturbance, and joined in the chase.

Clear of the buildings, Hatfield led the way south, hoping to skirt the town and reach the west road for Armstrong's before the pursuers caught up with them. The air, the cessation of the torture, and returning hope, had somewhat revived Taylor. He rode straighter, but still held on.

"Here they come!" yelled Pope, the breath jolting from him with the motion of his long-legged bronco.

Horsemen were galloping toward the west road, which led to Armstrong's farm. "We got to beat 'em to it, Eddie!" Hatfield yelled back. "Taylor can't last too long and I ain't what yuh'd call all-fired fresh myself."

"I'm shore grateful to yuh, Jim," muttered Taylor. "Thought I was a goner."

"Save yore wind for the next blizzard, Steve," advised Pope. "Just ride!"

They couldn't make it; that was obvious. Boyle had riders racing out to cover the highway, guessing they would make for Armstrong's. They could ride cross-country, but that was slower, and Boyle's killers would cut them off from their haven, hunt them down when the daylight came.

"Can we blast a way through?" wondered Pope.

It was doubtful, with Taylor unable to fight, hardly strong enough to keep his saddle. In the moonlight, out in the open, the enemy would have all the advantages.

Something whizzed past Hatfield's head, a bullet zinging from the rear. He looked around quickly. A half-dozen riders were coming hot on their trail, having followed them out of the settlement. Their whoops warned another ten or twelve who were making for the road, and these turned, to catch the fleeing riders between two fires!

CHAPTER XIX

Pursuit

LOOKING swiftly about, Hatfield saw that there was no cover at hand. Hunting a way out, he swung the sorrel south, with Taylor and Pope following. The Ranger and Pope opened fire to slow the pursuers, but the riders behind them made elusive targets in the night. The two gangs had identified themselves to one another with hoarse calls and they were converging on the fleeing men.

"There's another bunch of 'em, Ranger!" howled Eddie Pope as he sighted still other horsemen silently approaching from the west. There was no escape, now, thought the Ranger grimly. They must shoot it out, take as many along as they could, for they could not pick another route. The enemy had spread out, sweeping around to trap them, and the new band Pope had sighted could take a stand directly in front of the three fugitives.

"Hey, you!" sang out a gruff voice, the leader of the third group of horsemen. "Who's that?"

"Johnny Ort!" shrieked Pope. "It's us, Johnny! Watch out for them slicks on our tail! They're loaded and primed!"

It was Ort of the Dotted Circle and eight men, fighting cowboys, friends of Pope and Taylor. With a shout of joy, Hatfield swung toward them.

"What goes on?" demanded Ort.

"No time to tell now, Ort!" warned the Ranger. "We got to make the road home and pronto! Shoot to kill if they try to stop us."

He had to have a clear road if they were to reach Armstrong's. The bunch which had been headed to block the highway had turned after them now, and as the Dotted Circle boys flung up their guns, heavy fire opened up.

Fighting every inch of the way, they beat a retreat toward the wheat grower's farmhouse. The hired killers were not eager to close with them now, for Ort's cowboys were tough, and heavy slugs whined too close for comfort about the heads of Boyle's gang. Each desperado held back a bit, hoping another might surge forward and catch the lead.

Hatfield and Ort rode in the rear, snapping back at the angry enemy. In a momentary lull he learned that Ort, heeding Taylor's call for help, had gathered as many of his men as he could and had taken the road to Bordentown. Nearing the settlement they had heard the commotion and shooting, and had ridden toward the riders they could see against the glow of the lights.

The Ranger's guns and the accurate fire of Ort and his waddies made it a comparatively easy run, though there was always the danger of a stray bullet striking home. At the few turns in the road, Hatfield and Ort dropped back, and caught the van of the enemy as they came around the bend.

There was a gray streak in the sky behind them when they finally reached Armstrong's lane and rode their lathered, dusty horses to the buildings.

David Armstrong had reached home safely, through the fields. Sling Boyle had been occupied with his trap to snare the imposter, Jim Hald, and since the dapper killer's reinforcements had begun reaching Bordentown only that afternoon, Sling had had no time to waste on Armstrong.

Mústangs were quickly unsaddled, and turned loose to run, free from flying lead. Dave Armstrong and his family, roused from sleep, were warned of the imminent danger, but gladly turned out to welcome the Ranger and the Dotted Circle men, while Steve Taylor was given much needed attention. Hatfield made certain that the few harvest workers who had stuck with Armstrong were brought into the house.

As the doors were slammed and bolted, the pursuers were sighted.

"All set, boys?" called the Ranger. "They're in the lane!"

Boyle's men, shrieking insults, stayed back out of easy Colt range. They dared the men in the house to come out and fight, and some who carried rifles began firing, the smack of missles sharp as they pinged into the outer walls. But those strong walls easily withstood them.

"Waitin' for their pards to come up," growled Johnny Ort, rolling a much desired smoke.

AS THE morning light grew, more and more Boyle followers joined the party in the lane. And at last Sling himself appeared, with a good-sized bodyguard, and assumed command in the field.

"Whew!" Ort called, peeking from a wall opening. "Boyle's got forty, fifty gunnies out there, Ranger! We'll have our paws full."

Riders were moving out from both sides of the lane, to encircle the building, and some made for the barracks and the barn. They could come up safely enough from the far sides of the structures. Boyle was taking no chances but was surrounding his quarry. And all the while stragglers kept joining the enemy, swelling their ranks.

"He's too wary to charge in the daylight," observed Hatfield.

Ort stared at the tall officer. Hatfield knew what the rancher was thinking. If there was a charge, they must make every bullet count. For Armstrong had no weapons, no store of ammunition such as would have been found on the average ranch, and Ort's riders carried only what was in their belts and weapons. Hatfield had some spares, but none too many for a protracted battle.

The Ranger was in command of the defense. He posted sentries at various points. Among them were the two Armstrong lads, who were begging to help. He had the rest of his fighters partake of the hot coffee and food Mrs. Armstrong prepared. Then he told them to rest, for the Dotted Circle outfit had been riding all night.

When he had seen to everything vital, Hatfield took care of his own flesh wounds, cleansing them with hot water, and binding them with strips of clean cloth which Dolly

Armstrong furnished him. Steve Taylor was resting comfortably, his injuries treated. He was sleeping from sheer exhaustion and shock, and Florrie was watching over him.

"Keep a sharp guard," the Ranger ordered Dave Armstrong. "Call me if it looks like they mean to attack, savvy? I'm goin' to catch forty winks."

He leaned back in a corner, and shut his eyes, dozing to ward off some of his fatigue.

When the sun had risen, the day grew hot. The enemy, under Boyle, took it easy behind the outbuildings. Now and then one could be glimpsed as he rode the circle around the house at a safe distance.

When the Ranger roused and shook himself, he found that Mrs. Armstrong and Florrie had cooked a hearty meal which was waiting. Hatfield felt better, though his wounds ached and his cheek and arm were stiff and sore.

The sun was high now, with hardly any breeze stirring the ripe golden wheat.

"Another week or so," Armstrong told the Ranger, "and I'll lose my crop if it isn't brought in. But that's better than giving in to Herman Wagner."

Ort, his cowboys, the field hands, Hatfield and Armstrong sat down at the long table which was groaning with appetizing foods. Fried potatoes, big stacks of home-made graham bread, butter, honey and syrup, baked beans, fried chicken, and two huge rib roasts of beef confronted the hungry crew.

The diffidence of Ort and his men began melting away as their satisfied stomachs got the better of their shyness. There had been friction between the cowboys and the wheat growers, but no one could maintain too much dignity while enjoying such a feast.

Mrs. Armstrong brought Johnny Ort a fresh cup of coffee, and smiled down at him.

"Have some more roast beef," she urged. "After all, you sent it to us. It's your own cow."

Ort thought that was funny, and laughed, and his boys joined in.

"I'll send one over every Sunday, ma'am," promised Ort, "provided yuh ask me to dinner!"

One of the sentries at the windows reported that Boyle and his men had provisions, brought from Bordentown, no doubt, and were cooking a meal, and drinking from bottles they had fetched along. Sling had sent riders back that morning to report to Herman Wagner in town and get supplies.

And all the while, the gunny ranks still seemed to be swelling. Boyle had Wagner's and his own chief opponents penned in, and did not intend to permit them to escape.

WHEN dinner was over, Hatfield rolled a smoke and squatted by a front window to observe the foe.

"Boyle could have sent for explosives," he thought uneasily. "He's waitin' for dark this time. Don't fancy another daylight charge like the one at the old mill."

The scarcity of ammunition worried him greatly. If they were rushed after dark, they must spend bullets in covering fields of fire rather than making each one count. And not all the men in the house could shoot with the deadly accuracy of the Texas Ranger.

"Wish I knew where to pick up a couple dozen more tough fightin' men," was the Ranger's wishful thought. "Might smash 'em if I had that many."

He could defend the house for a time, until the ammunition ran out. But there was not another ranch for many miles, and he did not doubt that Wagner had watchers on the approaches to Bordentown, in case help was tried for from that quarter.

Anxiety over the fate of those he had come to save gnawed at Hatfield. He feared especially for Florrie and her mother, and for the two young Armstrong boys whose lives were still before them. When outlaws such as Boyle commanded went on the prod, and were winning, they were likely to go to any extremes.

Johnny Ort came to join him, and sat on his heels facing Hatfield. Stocky, easy to like, Ort blinked his mild blue eyes.

"These folks 're the salt of the earth, Ranger," he said in a low voice. "They're easy to get along with."

"That's right." Hatfield nodded. "They're Texans, like me'n you, and human bein's entitled to their rights. It takes all kinds to make a world, and wheat growers are mighty important to us in this State, just like you and yore feller ranchers are."

Ort stared at the silver star on silver circle, marking the big man as a Texas Ranger. Good citizens had only the greatest respect for such officers, whose integrity, ability and bravery had made them famous throughout the whole country.

"I been thinkin' it over," Ort went on then, "and I'd like mighty well to get back

to Emma and the gals. Don't take me wrong. I ain't sorry I come—I'd do it again. But s'pose Boyle waits till night and then tosses in a few bombs? It can be done."

"I've thought of that," the Ranger said soberly. "There's some kerosene in the shed behind the kitchen, and we can have flares ready to light up the yard. They'll have trouble gettin' close enough to toss a bomb in a winder. And if they don't bite the fuse off the right length, the bombs can be hurled back at 'em."

"Huh!" Ort said drily. "It's fun, playin' that kind of ball!"

Ort was not so much afraid as he was turning the problem over in his mind. As a rancher he was a leader of sorts and had to consider various problems and solve them.

Hatfield eyed him. Ort's arrival had saved Taylor, Pope and the Ranger, and had strengthened the defense of Armstrong's home.

"I might sneak out of here at dark, Ort," Hatfield said, "if I had any place to go, and return in time with help. But it's like yuh say. Boyle undoubtedly has tricks made ready, and he'll blow or burn us out, before the night's over. You savvy how many bullets we got. Yuh don't know any place I could fetch help pronto—say in three-four hours, do yuh?"

"Ain't no ranches that near, and not many spreads carry enough punchers to furnish a big fightin' crew. Cuss it, I wish I'd spoke to Lee Kilroy the other day, but this hadn't come up at the time and I let him go."

"Lee Kilroy? You don't mean the feller who owns the big LK north of El Paso? That's hundreds of miles away!"

"That's the hombre. He came through as advance man for a combined herd from the Trans-Pecos ranges, bein' drove north to stock the new ranges in Wyomin' Territory. Boy, was he hot! The wheat fields had 'em blocked and they was huntin' a route through. I give him permission to cross my range and he hoped to be able to bypass the farmers on the west."

"How many head of cattle in this combined herd of his?"

"Shucks, I disremember . . . now wait! He said somethin' about five thousand!"

HATFIELD made a rapid mental calculation. He was clutching at straws as he tried to figure a way out for the besieged. The average number of men needed to handle cattle on a long run was one puncher to every two hundred and fifty cows. There would be the cooks, wranglers, and foremen, maybe even owners and their sons traveling with such a huge herd.

"Where did Kilroy say the herd was when yuh talked with him?" the Ranger asked Ort.

"They was south, near the escarpment of the Staked Plain, three days ago. Kilroy said he'd left 'em that mornin', and he'd been ridin' all day."

"Fifty miles, more or less! By this time, they ought to be on yore range, Ort, and not too far away."

"If everything went as expected. Ten to fifteen mile a day is good travelin' for such a bunch."

"We got to stake everything on one throw," declared Hatfield. "I want you to write me a note, Ort. Mention Kilroy and tell them drovers who yuh are. My Ranger star'll do the rest. We can command the assistance of every honest citizen in Texas! If that herd's near enough for me to reach 'em in time, it's the only way out."

Ort merely nodded, and went to hunt paper and pen. . . .

Sling Boyle did not appear to be in any hurry. He was sure of his victims, pinned in the farmhouse, and took it easy.

But the afternoon hours dragged for Hatfield, impatient to be on his way. It would be sure death, though, and the end of all hope if he showed outside in the daylight. Killers ranged in a wide circle about the house.

The Ranger dozed a bit, resting for the ordeal. And he knew that somewhere out there, not too far off, Goldy was running free, waiting for his call.

CHAPTER XX

Allies

EARLY night fell at last. For an hour or two it would be fairly dark, and it was Hatfield's idea to make his dash before the moon came up. He needed to be able to run if necessary, so discarded his spurred boots, substituting moccasins he carried in his saddle-packs. He also left his Stetson behind, tying his black hair with his bandanna, and smudging lampblack on his face and hands to dull the sheen of flesh.

Pocketing his Colts, he crouched beside a darkened rear window, listening, as he made ready to start.

"You'll be in command while I'm gone, Ort," he said in a low voice. "Soon as yuh figger I'm out a hundred yards, raise a fuss in front, and toss out a kerosene flare to draw 'em. But make shore yuh don't let 'em get in too close."

"Luck, Ranger." Ort pressed his hand.

Hatfield slid over the sill. It was pitch-black outside now. He listened for sounds of the enemy and heard the stampings and noises made by horses and other animals, but no men's voices.

Down low, creeping along, the Ranger reached a hummock of rocks and low brush. Here he took a breathing spell.

A rider, one of Boyle's gunnies, armed with a carbine, came slowly by. Then, in front of the house, a yellow flame rose. Ort had tossed out a flare. Yells rose in the night air, and a few shots of the defenders' precious ammunition were fired. Boyle's mounted sentry rode swiftly toward the commotion.

Hatfield got up and ran as fast as he could toward the dark line of trees and bush along the stream. He began to whistle shrilly, the signal Goldy understood.

But others besides the sorrel heard him. Pounding hoofs were approaching, and he turned, revolver in his hand, to fight it out.

"Hey, there! Who—"

Guns blared, and a bullet tore into the ground a few inches from Hatfield's moving legs.

He fired back. Another horse was coming toward him, cutting him off, and he crouched, gasping from the swift run.

"Goldy!" he cried.

The swfit sorrel turned to him, nuzzling at him. The Ranger leaped on, bareback, and rode away, with bullets searching after him. . . .

Hatfield was tense with hope, which waxed and waned as he crossed Ort's range, looking for sign. A big herd would leave trail which would be visible even in the moonlight.

Riding bareback was difficult. The Ranger did not care for it but it was a lot better than walking. Besides, he could guide Goldy with his knees for the sorrel was as intelligent as a man.

The escarpment of the Staked Plain loomed inky black before him in the moonlight.

"They ain't come this far yet, that's a cinch," he muttered, turned due south, and rode on at full speed, the sandy dirt kicked up from under the sorrel's flying heels.

Time meant everything. Back at Armstrong's were all the people he hoped to save from death and destruction, and he was their one hope.

The great wall on his right bulged out two miles further on, and he had to veer away from its bulk. When he turned the corner, he sighted a faint red glow in the distance and headed straight for it. It was a dying campfire, and marked the site of the bivouac. There were wagons, to carry food and bedrolls and other necessities for the drovers.

A cowboy was on guard. He challenged the Ranger, who quickly identified himself.

The herd was grazing a quarter-mile off, held by a few night riders. The trail boss, a Pecos rancher named Frank Green, listened to the Ranger's story, and by the lantern light read the note from Johnny Ort.

"I can loan yuh twenty-five men, Ranger," he said promptly. "There'll have to be a skeleton crew left with the cattle."

"That'll do the trick. But every minute counts, if it ain't too late now!" Hatfield spoke urgently.

COWBOYS, young wranglers, three ranchers and five of their sons made up the rescue party led by the Texas Ranger. They loaned him a saddle, and spare ammunition for his Colts, for he had left all but the loads in his gun chambers with Ort.

He had spent three hours in finding them. But within ten minutes after he had found the drovers he was riding with them straight across the rolling Panhandle country to reach the farm. That was a comparatively short ride, and before long they were in sight of the besieged farmhouse.

"Looks like the place is afire," growled Frank Green, on a long-legged mustang at Hatfield's side. Behind them came the heavily armed posse.

In the sky over Armstrong's was a great red glow, and the Ranger's mouth was grim.

They were on the east-west road. He turned off before reaching the lane, however, for he wanted to surprise Boyle, sweep up the gunnies. They crossed the fence, held down for them by two possemen, and moved into the wheat. At the river, the horses forded the stream, and as they mounted the rise from the water, Hatfield realized that it

was the barracks which was burning, not the house.

Out in front of his riders, Hatfield saw something flash through the air toward a window. An instant later it was hurled back, and there was a violent explosion. Ort had thrown back a lighted bomb! Dust obscured a view of the yard for a time, but Hatfield saw vague figures, Boyle's dismounted gunnies, against the ruby glow of the burning barracks.

Boyle had his men coming in swiftly. The Ranger could see the closing circle. They set up wolfish howls, ringing with triumph, and were shooting heavy volleys at the windows. The replies were hardly worth mentioning—only two or three single pistol shots.

"They're out of bullets, boys!" Sling Boyle, hanging well back, bellowed. "In and at 'em. Take 'em! Blow 'em out!"

The raiders had more explosive missiles ready to light and throw. And Ort's ammunition was nearly gone!

The hardened cowmen and their boys who were led by the Ranger knew how to conduct a fight, and Hatfield had given his orders on the way. The two lines of horsemen fanned out, throwing a rough circle about the house, with the gunnies inside, looming against the firelight.

The Ranger galloped in. His Colts opened up on the vicious armed killers.

"Throw down, outlaws!" his stentorian voice rang over the battle din.

Gunfire spattered from the men he had brought with him. They were accurate shots, and Boyle's followers felt the tearing slugs from Colts, shotguns and carbines. An outlaw's horse went down, throwing his rider, both screeching in agony. Others clutched their wounds, and as Hatfield whirled around toward the point where he had last seen Sling Boyle, panic set in.

Relentlessly the ring closed tight. A few Boyle men leaped on their horses, seeking escape. Johnny Ort, whooping it up with his boys, charged from the house, expending what few bullets they had left, to aid in the roundup, as the hired outlaws began throwing down their guns, hands rising as they begged for mercy.

Hatfield tore off toward the lane and sighted Sling Boyle, hastily mounting a black gelding.

"Hold it, Boyle!" he roared. "Yuh're mine!"

Boyle turned, snarling. He held a pistol in his right hand, and as he ripped his foot from the stirrup, swinging to meet the Ranger's challenge, the skittish mustang lunged away.

"Surrender in the name of the Texas Rangers!" cried Hatfield.

Boyle was staring at him, eyes blazing. He knew what would be in store for him if he gave up. He raised his Colt, firing quickly, hoping to kill the tall officer on the golden sorrel.

Hatfield's revolver kicked against the palm of his steady hand. He sent a second shot after the first, and Boyle shuddered twice. Sling's good arm dropped at his side, and his head sagged. He went down, as the Ranger flashed past.

* * * * *

HERMAN WAGNER stared at the tall Ranger, at the silver star on silver circle pinned to the dirt-stained shirt. The fat man was in his night shirt and was sitting on the side of his wide bed. The kicking in of his door had awakened him in the gray dawn over Bordentown.

"You!" he muttered thickly.

"Here I am, Boss, reportin'," Hatfield said brightly. "Sling Boyle has cashed in his dirty checks, and all yore boys, the standbys and the bunch from Amarillo, are tryin' to think up good excuses to tell the judge for bein' so naughty. I picked up Curly Frye, too. He talks easy and scarces fine. He swears you helped kill MacLane, the rightful owner of that flour mill. And there's other things yuh got to answer for. Remember the story I told yuh about the fat pig who blowed hisself up by hoggin' too much?"

Herman Wagner was dazed. He looked ridiculous, a shaking, gross fat man sitting there on the bed, his evil empire shattered.

"You—a Texas Ranger!" was all he could say, for he knew what the star meant.

"Sent here to help the wheat growers beat yuh, Wagner. Get on yore pants. I'm takin' yuh to the calaboose."

Wagner's right hand was close to his white-cased pillows. Hatfield, ready for such a move, saw the flame of hate in the pudgy man's eyes, and caught the flick of Wagner's shoulder as his arm moved. Under the pillow was a loaded pistol, a snub-nosed, large-caliber weapon.

The Rangers had to shoot, as Wagner, with a curse of fury, rolled off the bed with surprising agility, whipping the revolver around to kill his tormentor.

Hatfield felt the wind of the bullet, which drove through the plaster wall behind him. The Ranger shot to stop his opponent, and the big revolver filled the bedroom with its voice. Wagner began to shiver like a bowlful of jelly. His breathing, always stertorous, grew agonized as his gun arm dropped and he rolled over on his side, with a punctured head.

* * * * *

Captain Bill McDowell listened with deep satisfaction to Ranger Hatfield's report at Austin headquarters.

"Yuh done a purty job, Hatfield," the Ranger Captain commended. "Wish I'd been there when yuh took care of Boyle and Wagner."

McDowell sighed. In his imagination he could feel the danger, hear the banging guns as he fought it out with a vicious enemy, and experienced a vicarious thrill of battle.

"Wagner died." Hatfield said. "The wheat growers have taken over the roller mill in Bordentown and aim to run it themselves. They expect to rush their harvest in. They made Steve Taylor manager. Dave Armstrong wants Florrie to be fixed comfortable before she marries Steve."

"It's a fine start, with Armstrong and Ort makin' friends and helpin' each other." McDowell nodded. "That's what Texas needs cooperation, and all stickin' together. Men can get along together, if they try. That new breadbasket's mighty important to the world."

McDowell had reports on his cluttered desk. They came from different sections of the vast Lone Star State. He had only a handful of Rangers with which to maintain law, order and justice within Texas. But sometimes such a difficult case cropped up, that only the most experienced, only the cleverest of officers could be sent to solve it.

Hatfield knew the captain's problems. He himself would not have enjoyed being in McDowell's shoes, for he loved action, the wildness of the danger trails he rode with such genius.

"What's next, Cap'n Bill?" he drawled.

McDowell cleared his throat gently.

"Well, there's a fuss, quite a fuss, down on the Rio Grande, near Eagle Pass, Hatfield," he began in a calm cool manner. "Oh, shucks!" He banged the desk with his fist and cursed. "I can't keep it all in without bustin' loose now and then! I'm goin' to fire that sawbones and get another who'll let me hit the ceilin' like normal. Here's the gist of the matter down on the Border. . . ."

Not long after, the Ranger, his equipment and clothing spruced up, rode away from headquarters, with McDowell giving him a wave of encouragement from the doorway.

The Law must be upheld, and Hatfield on the golden sorrel carried its might to the extreme reaches of the mighty State.

FOLLOW THE FURTHER EXCITING EXPLOITS OF
RANGER JIM HATFIELD IN

GOLD FOR THE DEAD

By

JACKSON COLE

NEXT MONTH'S SMASH-PACKED COMPLETE ACTION NOVEL!

Stape slid his horse to an abrupt halt within a rod of two men holding cocked six-shooters

THE ABALONE RING

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

In paying a debt to a friend, ex-wildcat Stape Linster is faced by strange clues—as well as the foes who left them!

OLD Ransy Kennard rode back from town with bad news. He stopped at his weatherbeaten big ranch house for the time required to snatch a drink of water and leave his mail, then was in the saddle again and loping out across the range to look up cowboy Stape Linster, ex-wildcat.

Lean as an Indian and medium tall, Linster was, with tawny hair sunburned to bronze and eyes like gray rock. He wore no gun-belt, felt sort of naked without it, but figured he wouldn't really need the weapon so long as gambler "Curly" Wolfe kept out of his way.

Hoofs pounding jerked him around in his saddle. A minute later, grizzled Old Ransy pulled to a halt beside him.

"What's up, boss?"

"Stape," Kennard said, "yore good friend Henry Garland has been shot, and will mebbe die."

"The old sheriff?" Linster seemed unable

to get it. But he did get it. His eyes were more than ever like gray rock.

" 'Good friend' is right, boss," he said, then. "He stuck to me when nobody else would, and cleared me when circumstantial evidence mighta hung me, and stood for me when I came here to work. Say—who shot him?"

"Nobody knows," answered Kennard. "Done in a hold-up a few hours ago. The Bald Hill silver mine people had their big payroll sent down on the stage from a Butte City bank, and the guard was afraid and asked Garland to ride that last lap with him. Lone road agent killed the guard and winged the driver, after he'd blasted old Henry down. Got clean away with the strongbox and that big payroll. Can you beat that, Stape?"

"Wouldn't even try." Stape Linster spoke so fast that the words almost overlapped. "Yuh'll have to let me off for a while, Ransy." He spurred his cow pony into a streak southward.

"Be nice if everybody was as keen to pay a debt as that," old Ransy Kennard told his still panting horse.

The sun had set when Linster rode into the old cow town. He went straight to Sheriff Henry Garland's home, and recognized the horse at the gate as the doctor's. Already a lamp burned in the Garland bedroom. Linster crept to the open window and peered through. The billygoat-bearded doctor, sitting at the bedside, saw him and frowned, but said nothing.

THE old lawman's lined face seemed as white as his mustache and hair. His eyes turned slowly, as though in great weariness, toward the ex-wildcat cowboy at the window, and he smiled faintly.

"Hi, Stape. So you heard, uh?"

"Yeah, Ransy told me. Doc, is he able to talk and tell me what the bandit looked like?"

"Better let me do it," the doctor suggested. "I overheard the description he gave his deputies before they lit out for the Bald Hill section. Big man, heavy set. Rode a bay horse, wore drab clothes, a faded bandanna mask. Nothing stood out, except this: on the gun hand of the robber there was a big gold ring with a sort of iridescent, greenish, abalone mother-of-pearl set wider than a dime."

"I somehow got the idea," weakly added Henry Garland, "that he took pains—to show that ring. Didn't speak a word—only motioned. Meanin', likely, it was somebody whose voice I—I'd have known. Stape, I—can't talk—more now." The tired old eyes closed.

Linster muttered, "Doc, I wanted him to swear me in as a deputy, just in case I have to kill the jigger. Because I aim to pay Henry back for what he done for me. Happen to know if he suspects anybody, Doc?"

"He mentioned the names of some heavy-set, big men, and among them was the names of Zack Powers and Curly Wolfe. Chief Deputy Mart Ensley can swear you in, for that matter."

Linster turned away in the deepening twilight. He was scowling. He never had cottoned to Mart Ensley, and Mart never had cottoned to him. The chief deputy was all set for the sheriff job when Garland was through. There were those who felt that Ensley was a little too ambitious in this direction.

Dismounting at the sheriff's office, which took up the front of the county's squat jail building, Linster tied his horse, and hurried into the lamplight. Only the one-eyed old jailer was in the office.

"Hiyah, cowboy!" He'd always had a liking for Stape Linster. He winked. "I know, cowboy—you've come fer yore gun-belt. It's in a desk-drawer there, and don't yuh git it, neither, whilst I looks at a purty picture I got over here; picture of—uh, name of it is Cupid and Pzitchey, or somethin' like that."

Stape grinned and put up a hand. "Never mind, old-timer. Mart Ensley hasn't come in yet?"

The jailer shook his head. Linster sank into Henry Garland's desk chair. He pulled his stetson low over his rock-gray eyes and began thinking hard.

A heavy-set big man in drab clothing, on a bay horse, wearing a big abalone ring, the Doc said. Somebody the sheriff knew. But clothing and horse meant exactly nothing. There were hundreds of bays, and clothes could be changed. Curly Wolfe, the gambler, whom he had caught with an ace too many in a stud game and thrashed before a crowd, easily became his prime suspect, as he sat there turning over in his mind the meager bits of evidence that he had to go on.

A growing rattle of hoofs filled the street outside. It was Mart Ensley and two under deputies. Ensley sent the two off to supper, and soon afterward was striding heavily into

the office. His hard, pale blue eyes narrowed when he saw the waiting Stape Linster.

"What yuh doin' here, waddy?"

"Had a notion I might help yuh nail that road agent's hide to the jailhouse door, Mart," drawled Linster. "If yuh'll deputize me, I'm shore the judge'll release me from my promise not to tote a gun for a year. How about it?"

Ensley looked insulted and seemed to swell with hostility. Then he grinned, and it was like a horse eating briary hay, thought Linster.

"Just what do yuh think I'm here for?"

"Like I said, I had an idea I might help yuh, Mart."

The chief deputy's bare-toothed grin persisted.

"Just how?"

"First thing," Linster said, "I'd find me a heavy-set man, well known to the sheriff, who didn't have a alibi. Then I'd—"

"Plenty such men," Mart Ensley interrupted. "Even me. I was out of town at the time o' the hold-up, and am built heavy, and couldn't prove where I was to save me."

"I'd investigate yuh," Linster said.

"Like heck yuh would!" Ensley caught himself, lowered his voice. "Maybe yuh can tell us the reason for the ring, that robber-killer took pains to show, if yuh're so smart, eh?"

"Two possible reasons," Stape Linster answered promptly. "He was tryin' to sort of hide his identity by wearin' a ring he had never been seen with before, or else he had a brainkink so crazy that I couldn't explain it. Heard of the killer who left a jack of spades on each man he shot, didn't yuh?"

A LITTLE crowd was gathering around the street door. Out of it stepped the squat giant, Curly Wolfe. He was in black except for a white shirt. He had tightly curled, yellowish hair, and the blue of his eyes was paler than that of the chief deputy's. There was a six-shooter hump on the right side of his coat.

"Mart," he began at once, "a bunch of us would like to know what luck yuh had."

"No luck, Curly," Ensley said. "We trailed the bandit a ways, and found where he'd shot the stage strongbox open. From there he'd doubled back to the road, where we lost his trail. Look, Curly. Yuh're the proper size, and the sheriff knows yuh right well, and folks are goin' to ask if yuh can prove a alibi. Can yuh?"

Wolfe laughed a little. "Joking, Mart? No? Well, it's too bad, but I missed out on that. At the time of the robbery, I was at Zack Power's place. Went down to collect some money Zack owed me, a loan. He wasn't there; nobody at all was there, Mart."

From somewhere back in shadows came the voice of the peppery one-eyed old jailer. The voice was derisive, jeering.

"Yuh needed the money all right, I reckon, on account of nobody will gamble with yuh since Stape Linster catched yuh with a fifth ace and whipped yuh to a frazzle with his gun-barrel. He ought to have shot yuh!"

Stape went tense in the desk chair. Wolfe ignored the voice. So did Mart Ensley. Wolfe spoke again:

"When yuh get irons on the sidewinder, Mart, better hustle him to some other town to jail him. Old Sheriff Henry Garland is our best-liked citizen, and the jigger wouldn't be safe in yore jail here."

"Yuh leave that to me," the chief deputy said. He swung his gaze around to Linster. "You, cowboy, might as well clear out, because I sure ain't goin' to deputize yuh."

"All right, but see that yuh nail Abalone Ring," quickly replied Linster. He rose, headed for the street door, then paused for just long enough to throw back, "But I'm bettin' yuh don't!"

He left his cow pony in the liveryman's care, went to a restaurant, ordered supper. His mind kept busy while he ate. If he couldn't work with badge and gun, he'd work without them. His debt to Henry Garland was going to be paid, and paid right, and the cost could be what it would.

Certainly Curly Wolfe was a prime suspect. But Linster had not discarded other suspects because of Curly. Mart Ensley, he figured, wasn't much above staging a big paying hold-up. Mart had been a bad one, years before in another county. It was his iron nerve that had won the law job for him here.

"Out of town, and mebbe didn't know Henry Garland would be along as extra guard," Linster told himself. "On that account he's in deeper water than he'd thought to be. That is, if it was Mart . . . Hold on, now—I'm forgettin' Zack Powers wasn't at home at the time of the robbery? Wonder if it's possible that Curly could have been tellin' the truth? I'll shore look into that."

Stape Linster bunked up in a livery stable hayloft that night.

When dawn came his pony had kicked off four miles to the Bald Hill stage road. The country hereabouts was hilly, wild. He turned left and into a road that was little more than a trail, and followed it for three miles before he arrived at the entrance to a level, well-grassed basin with steep rock walls. Since a two-room house and a pair of corrals blocked the basin entrance, it was an ideal spot for a one-man cow spread.

Linster saw nobody around. He reined in near the front door, and hallooed gingerly. He didn't know Zack Powers well. In point of fact, nobody, apparently, knew Powers well. Unless, Linster reflected, it was Curly Wolfe. Curly had said that Zack owed him money.

There being no response to his halloo, the cowboy rode around to the back.

There in a corral he saw two horses, a bay and a sorrel. Powers, living alone, was unlikely to have more than two horses.

THE silence was ominous. A queer feeling gripped Old Ransy Kennard's ex-wildcat cowboy. He dismounted, let the pony's reins fall, went to the back door and pulled the rawhide latch-string.

The door opened to his touch. He stepped into the combination kitchen and dining room, and found it a wreck. Plainly, a savage fight had taken place here.

He hurried into the larger front room, which also was a wreck. There he drew up short with a gasp of horror.

"What—the—devil!"

Near the cold fireplace Zack Powers lay supine in his own blood, with one hand outflung. An irridescent greenish gleam came from the third finger of that hand.

It was a big abalone ring.

The red fluid was dark, drying, not fresh. Powers' holster was empty. The stubbly-bearded, heavy face was pale, but not waxen, Stape Linster noted, and he knelt to feel for a pulse. It was there, but feeble—a mere thread. Linster rose, looked about the room.

On a shelf he found whisky. A faint shudder ran through Powers as a trickle of it reached his throat. Then he swallowed slowly, again and again.

"Come out of it, pardner!" Linster said.

Powers opened his eyes less than half way.

"Who shot you, Zack?" Linster asked him.

The slitted eyes turned slowly toward Linster and, after a moment, came to a dim focus. Linster repeated his question. The pallid lips moved only a little.

"Henderson." Powers' voice was so weak that Stape Linster barely caught the words. "Henderson—shot me."

"Who's he?"

"Rattlesnake."

"I know," Stape said. "But who is he?"

Zack Powers opened his eyes wider, and stared, breathing jerkily. Then he closed his eyes, as though overcome by a great weariness, and began muttering.

"Hurts—to talk," he gasped. "No witness, anyhow. One man's word—no good."

There was truth in that. The man was going to die. The wonder of it was that he'd lived as long as he had. Stape Linster got hastily to his feet.

"All right, Zack. I'll ride to town quick as I can and hustle the doctor here to yuh, and he can be the witness."

Before he ran out of the little ranch house he gave Powers another swallow of whisky. Then a few moments later, he was in his saddle and battering the pony's ribs with his heels. Too bad if Zack passed without having told what he had to tell.

The pony carried him swiftly around a bend in the rocky, scrub-bordered road. There he slid the animal to an abrupt halt within a rod of two men, holding cocked six-shooters.

Curly Wolfe and Mart Ensley!

Wordlessly they sat their horses. After a moment, Linster spoke, and scorn was plain in his voice.

"You fellas would be reasonably safe in leatherin' yore hardware, seein' that I've not got so much as a pocketknife on me. Out early, ain't yuh?"

Neither of the two holstered his weapon.

"Out early, yeah," the chief deputy replied. "Heap of work on our hands, with Henry Garland laid up like he is. I rode down here, cowboy, if yuh just got to know, to ask Zack Powers a bunch of questions. Curly wanted to ride with me. Uneasy about Zack, Curly is, because he wasn't at home yesterday. Is afraid somethin' might o' happened to him. Mind if I inquire where you was goin' in such a blazin' hurry, my pretty young cowboy? And also, would yuh mind tellin' me what you was doin' down here?"

"Somethin' has happened to Powers, all right," Stape Linster flung back. "He's shot in at least two places—hours old, it is, and he would have been dead if he hadn't been rawhide tough. I was high-tailin' to town

after the doctor. I—"

"Powers? Powers shot?" cut in Chief Deputy Ensley.

SUDDENLY he was grinning with his teeth closed, once again like a horse eating briary hay.

"Not yet you ain't goin' after the doc, waddy," he said. "If Zack is shot, could be that you done it and was makin' a getaway when we stopped yuh! No gun; eh? You could have found one!"

"Plumb dead right," Curly Wolfe said. "We better take him with us, Mart."

"Shore," Mart said. "Now be so kind, cowboy, as to turn your little hoss and come along."

Stape Linster obeyed, since he had no other choice in face of the odds.

"What kind of night did old Henry have, y'know?" he asked then.

"Pretty good night and will make it now," was the short, sour answer. "Anyhow, that's what the doc told me."

"The doc knows his business, Mart," Linster replied. "And I'm shore tickled pink about Henry."

The three dismounted at the front door. Ensley went in last. They drew up near Powers, who did not open his eyes. Curly Wolfe broke a thick silence.

"The man is dead, Mart. Look there—on Zack's hand! The abalone ring!"

"Yeah," said Ensley. "I'll be danged! So he was the bandit and killer. I half thought it, Curly. Shot like he is, he never could have got off with that iron strongbox the way he did, which means he was drilled afterwards."

"Yeah," Wolfe agreed.

Linster's spirits fell. Powers' face was taking on a waxen cast; his breathing, if he was breathing, was so light that no movement of his chest or nostrils was to be seen.

Beside the cold fireplace stood a heavy iron poker. Linster eased himself around to a point near that poker, just in case. He wished he had a gun, but—he didn't have one, and that was that. "Notice anything wrong with the picture, Deputy?" he asked.

"No-o," Ensley drawled. "Shore don't. Do you?"

"Shore do," Linster said. "Look close, Mart."

Wolfe must have seen it too, for he was pale now.

Suddenly Linster shouted, "Zack!"

Powers' eyelids began flickering. Linster spoke fast: "Get down there with yore ear close, Mart, and ask him who shot him—*look out, Mart—Curly, there!*"

Wolfe had gone deathly white. Desperation flamed in his slitted, pale eyes. He jerked his six-shooter up level.

The deputy was late with his iron. Wolfe fired, and the bullet peeled Ensley's scalp, knocked him to his knees, addled him.

Through the swirling smoke Stape Linster sprang like a puma. The heavy iron poker clunked against Curly Wolfe's head a small part of a second before the gambler's weapon blasted again, so that this slug went wild, and Chief Deputy Ensley lived on. Wolfe fell, lay quite still. Linster kicked the smoking gun through the open front doorway.

"Quick—ask Zack who shot him!" he barked.

The two explosions had opened Powers' eyes. Ensley shook his head to clear it, crawled to Zack and questioned him.

"Henderson—shot me," Powers muttered, and he kept muttering. Sketchy though it was, it proved entirely sufficient. Pieced out, it amounted to this:

He and Wolfe were the last of a notorious Texas hold-up gang. They'd been laying low here for more than a year. Zack had backed Curly up in the Bald Hill company payroll robbery. He'd been hidden in nearby scrub, ready to help Curly if he needed help—which he hadn't. And out of this had grown the dispute and the fight—Wolfe had objected to splitting the proceeds evenly.

"So he shot you and left yuh for dead, puttin' that abalone ring on yuh to give yuh all the blame," said Mart Ensley.

Powers nodded weakly, stiffened and then relaxed and was dead.

"And yuh done it without a gun, cowboy," said Ensley. "Saved my life when yuh knocked Curly out. He would have shot the whey right square out of me, if yuh hadn't. I was on my knees. I owe yuh a whole mess of apologies, and yuh've shore got 'em. Sheriff Henry Garland will likely offer yuh my job."

"If he does, I'll turn it down with thanks," said Linster. "I think you can be depended on now. Well, no use worryin' about what Wolfe done with the cash. When he sees that Zack's dyin' talk has put his neck in a noose, the cash will show up, is my bet."

It was, later, to prove a first-class bet.

(Concluded on page 97)

He neither looked, dressed nor acted like a Ranger — he had neither horse nor six-gun, but—

The pilgrim was turning the muzzles of his guns this way and that

A 22-GUN RANGER WALKS

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

CAPTAIN JUDSON MURK, of the Lost Forks Ranger Camp, noticed a puffing of alkali dust, indicating a man walking on foot coming north from the Panhandle Trace. Not many men walked in the area of "Cap" Murk's jurisdiction, which was all of Texas south of No Man's Land. That was the section south of the terrain the surveyors and state forgot when the organized Texas, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico, leaving it jutting out from Indian Territory.

Murk's Texas domain altogether was about 40,000 square miles in area, and usually he had eight men—seven privates and a lieutenant—to keep peace, law and order throughout his jurisdiction. He now was two men short, due to sudden death and resignation. Captain Murk was alone in the camp, feeling idle and lonesome.

This man on foot was peculiar. He was carrying something, first in one hand, then the other. He was walking right along, having stepped off the Panhandle stage where it

stopped halfway between nowhere and what's-its-name, county seats with sheriffs and city marshals, with whom Murk had no truck, a Texas Ranger recognizing only Ranger authority.

Cussing softly to himself, looking around in hopes of seeing some lone horsemen coming to Lost Fork Ranger headquarters, Cap Murk sighed. He sure needed two extra men. Bad, mean scoundrels were coming into the Panhandle faster than seven men could root them out.

Murk had been worse off, thereabouts in his day. He'd patrolled 80,000 square miles with five men for a spell. He wasn't exactly worrying, now. Austin ough to have sent him a man, or let him pick up one or two, himself. Anyhow, dad-blasted politicians!

This man walking came straight toward the clump of cottonwoods in which the Panhandle Camp was located. Long ago this had been the site of a ranch, but the buildings were practically all gone. In their place were the weatherbeaten gray tents, room for a dozen or so men.

A Lone Star flagpole stuck up in front of the captain's tent. Murk had worn a circle around the pole base, tramping around and around, till he had a trench a foot or so deep. It helped him to think. But that was the only walking Cap Murk thought of doing.

This walking person was near enough to show he was toting a leather satchel. He was a tall, wiry man, nearly a foot taller than the captain, who was five feet, two inches tall in his riding boots. And this fellow wore a standard six-inch brim nutria hat, but he had a white collar and a necktie. Furthermore, he wore laced shoes and store-clothes—city store. Obviously, he was coming to the Ranger camp. Now what in thunder would a man on foot be coming toward Murk's headquarters for, anyhow?

When they finally stood face to face, Murk saw it was a well-tanned, well-toothed face, smooth-shaven and with blue eyes. His hair was sun-bleached, he wore a narrow belt and—no guns! The captain's curiosity increased. The scoundrel's coat flapped open with the wind and there was a small star filed out of a two-bit silver piece—a Lone Star! The insignia of the Texas Rangers? Captain Murk's hand dropped to the butt of his own gun—this false pretender needed killing!

Instead, this man handed the captain a sure enough significant rectangle of good-quality paper, partly printed and partly filled in with an inked pen. Murk's chin dropped, exposing the cud of chewing in his mouth. There was this fellow's appointment to the Texas Rangers, all in due and unmistakable order—if it wasn't a forgery!

HERE was Jesse Lou Vannie, man-grown and a native son of Texas. He had been appointed a Ranger by the major commanding—at Austin, of course. All the details, description, signature and countersignature were all there! Here was a Texas Ranger walking, wearing a silver star and no gun, much less guns, creating bulges or showing plain in holsters!

Captain Murk blinked, re-read the appointment, speechless! Didn't this man know a Ranger just naturally had to have a horse and at least one man-size gun? No use saying anything! Ever since Austin began to make appointments, some of the doggonedest fellows had showed up, wearing the literature of Texas Rangers, displaying the symbol—Oh, well!

"Last tent—furthest cot!" Cap Murk jerked a thumb, and for a wonder, the newcomer just picked up that leather satchel, dust rolled off it, and the Austin Ranger lifted his feet to the furthest shelter from Murk's own tent possible, without saying a word.

The captain grinned, seeing this Austin recruit stop at the half barrel into which spring water was running from a V-trough. He soused his head, and gulped down what seemed like a gallon of water. Probably the thirstiest thing a man can do in the Panhandle of Texas is walk. So, now, Murk had another Texas Ranger under his command. And he was sure one heck of a note!

"Influence, politics, ignorance—" Murk sighed.

Cap Murk had known he needed to expect something, but what? They sure had ideas about jokes, down at Austin. No matter how loud a man yelled out there in the Panhandle, the sound would never reach down to the east side of the Cedar Belt.

The captain never had been any hand to put his feelings down on paper. If he couldn't say it with tongue or gun, he didn't see any use of trying to spell it out in ink. He'd had specimens from Austin, but they'd all come in on horses—so-called. Nobody was further from the State Capital than Murk. He mostly had his own way, operating with what he swapped with other captains.

"I'd like to see Jesse Lou Vannie in the middle of a herd of high-country cows!" Murk rumbled as he grinned. "And him afoot!"

That was a thought. Given orders, a Ranger just naturally headed for the scene and occasion. The officer in command just said; "Go get!" and the Ranger went—pronto. Not to head out, forthwith, meant the exercise of a Ranger Captain's ability to blister with language.

"A Texas Ranger—no guns, no horse, wearin' a white collar!" Cap Murk shook his head. He was seething with the feelings of a perfectly competent field worker, genuine business promoter, when somebody higher up plays a dirty, despicable, insulting joke on him.

Putt Bangdy came riding along the stage-road. There was a curl of dust smoking up behind him big enough for a territorial governor. Putt had been down into Greer county, after the mail.

Mail to Captain Murk's Ranger squad, consisted mostly of notices or rewards offered for men wanted from as little as $50 to as much as $25,000 or so. Sometimes newspaper clippings were included in envelopes with dodgers from sheriffs and other lawmen. The clippings gave details about fugitives who might try to cross the Murk camp squad's territory.

Sure enough, Bangdy brought sixty-odd live reward notices and some scores of casuals from off yonder, back east and north. Murk never would get used to being asked to pick up lost runaway boys, or city gangsters wearing patent leather dancing shoes, riding bicycles.

Among the important dodgers, Captain Murk came upon five that were of real interest to a Texas Ranger officer. They didn't need more than the names, with a string of alias casual misleading designations;

MOSEY JACK, alias Mick Burley.
CUPFULL, alias Budin Cosalle.
JUD the CANARY, alias Wall Picket.
THE BARBED WIRE TWINS, alias Pat and Kit Crawding.

They were genuine problems, not only across Texas pasture, but through the mineral, homestead, Fur Belt, railroad and banking lands west of the old Forest Belt Line. According to a news clipping pasted to the reward notice for Mosey Jack, these pals had come down out of the Missouri Basin, following the foothills of the Rocky Mountain Divide, on their way into western Kansas, angling toward the Rio Grande by way of the Indian Territory and Texas Panhandles.

"Look out for these men!" the general notice fairwarned. "They shoot on suspicion and where one is, the others are close by."

The newspaper clipping printed the fair-warning. It listed about seventeen assorted attacks on large sums in small bundles—stage, train, and bank robberies. The outlaws had terrorized a hundred communities, and the individual reward notices read: "DEAD or ALIVE", with guarantees of some rewards indicated, from $20,000 to to $30,000 per.

Captain Murk looked through the reward notices he had accumulated during his sojourn at the Lost Forks headquarters. The stack was about 24 inches high, assorted out into various kinds of crimes and criminals. The "General Westerns" was three inches thick, and the Mosey Jack Outlaw Band bunch was nearly and inch thick.

"Hi-i, Vannie!" Murk turned and yelled.

VANNIE appeared instantly, stepping into his pants. He had them buttoned and his handsome embossed leather belt drawn tight, when he stood before the captain. He was barefooted. His prompt attention pleased the captain, in spite of his prejudice.

"These fellers 'll prob'ly short cut 'cross No Man's land, an' head by the Canadian over to the Rio," Murk said, "Yuh better get out there an' head 'em off!"

"Yes, sir!" Jesse Lou Vannie answered respectfully, turned and dog-trotted back to his tent.

Within a few minutes he was out, wearing socks, hunting boots, a loose woolen Hickory shirt, and carrying a small canvas bag by a trap over his right shoulder. Murk blinked. He might have known Austin had wished a flatheel onto him. Still, he felt surprised. Even Texas politicians get like that, sometimes.

Ranger Vannie went to the cook-tent and when he emerged, the lunch bag was bulging. Simble, the cook, came out and watched this man go out of camp on foot with a lunch bag to tote his grub. Two other Rangers besides Murk watched.

This new recruit was going out with no visible means of self-defence, much less of offense. He was walking. The alkali dust he scuffled at intervals was visible long

after Ranger Vannie was diminished in perspective to a mere agitation in the far-flung mirage of the Lost Forks betweenland.

"Five miles—on foot! A Texas Ranger!" the captain breathed his statement. He took of his hat and stamped it into the soft ground at the foot of the Lone Star flag pole. He picked it up, shook the alkali out of it, and pulled it down to his ears.

"Ah, Cap'n, don' that feller know a Ranger has to supply his own hoss?" Simble inquired respectfully.

"Simble, I shore don't know! What'd he take for eats—cookies?" the ranger captain answered.

"No, suh, jerked beef, mos'ly. Tin cup, plate, table ware," the cook explained, "cold bread, can of butter, smoked salmon. Yas, suh, some cookies—chinked in around."

"Got a gun, Simble?"

"A gun, suh? No, suh—Jes' one of them twenty-twos—snake gun, suh,"

"An' I got a twenty-two gunman wished on me!" Murk walked around the Lone Star flagpole, clockwise and counterclockwise. "Dog-gone! I feel like I ain't in my right mind! How come I turned down city marshal in Sheffield, an' Llano City, an' them places!"

Captain Murk had worn quite a rut around that flagpole, his high, sharp heels hooking in. Of course, he was just showing off. At the same time he had to express his feelings. His boys were laughing at him, even Simble, the old cook—the only privileged person anywhere around.

Murk had the feeling that perhaps Ranger Vannie wasn't what he was really cracked up to be. Rangers had sometimes come to camp on foot, carrying their saddles or leaving the gear hanging on a mesquite or jack pine, or some other tree, near a dead horse.

If Vannie had just said the word—begged—he could have borrowed a horse. Now wouldn't it be a real humdinger if this Jesse Lou Vannie couldn't ride? That was all he needed to make him unique in the Ranger captain's experience. It would, in fact, be a historic number in the whole history of the Rangers!

Murk rode out along that foot-man's trail. Vannie was still walking up over the ridge ten miles away, where even glasses could no longer show his dust—if it hadn't been dark before he got that far. The captain read the tracks. There it was five miles, ten miles, and without a break clear up to North Fork spring.

There Vannie had sat down to eat a lunch. Bread crumbs, a shred of skim-meat, a piece of cookie. From the looks of things, the Ranger had been there in the dark. He'd struck a match and burned a sliver of jack pine pitch wood. Imagine a Ranger who couldn't eat by starlight—who risked having a light when on the trail of outlaws—of Mosey Jack's outlaw band!

But a few yards on beyond the springs, Murk found a rattlesnake about six feet long, four inches in diameter and shot through the head with a very small bullet, about BB size—in fact, a 22-slug. It was the truth. Here was a Texas Ranger with a single-shot 22-gun!

"It'd be mighty funny," Murk sighed, "if he wasn't in the comp'ny—and was scored up to Austin Headquarters—Huh!"

Nevertheless, there the tracks led, after more than twenty miles of hiking, bound up toward the north side of the Texas Panhandle where that band of $150,000 outlaws was coming down through No Man's Land, according to the reward notices and accompanying news clipping. Murk bristled from his high heels to his pulled down Nutria wide-brim, a distance of five feet, and 135 pounds of gristle, salt and bone between.

JESSE LOU VANNIE caught the Panhandle stage up to Dallam Court. He arrived there in the dark and kept walking north all night long, three miles an hour for ten hours. He excused himself for not knowing just where the state line of Texas stood up against No Man's Land. He came to the Beaver River valley, following an old buffalo trail, in No Man's Land.

The Beaver River was mostly wet quicksand where he struck it. He looked and listened, as if that wild country sounded any different from down along the Rio Grande or over on the Canadian, or Red River, or the Arkansaw. In fact, though, he was the only man in all the West who was able to hear what the little birds were telling him—chirruping, cheeping, cluck-ticking. He built a fire made a camp and shot three prairie chickens with BB-caps, using that funny little pistol of his.

He set up three stiff sticks, the top ends sharpened, and stuck the skinned and gutted prairie chickens on the points. There the dry heat of the driftwood fire he built

browned and dried the little carcasses out. A soft south breeze was blowing. This carried the thin blue fumes and the rich meaty smell of fire and birds up along the buffalo migrant trail.

Presently, Vannie sprinkled salt on one of the carcasses and bit off chunks of wing-breast meat, eating heartily. He had just got the breasts eaten, and was nibbling the splintery leg meat when he heard a voice.

"Pilgrim!" the voice said, "don't git nervy—We're hongry, too!"

"Help yoreself!" Vannie enswered, nibbling an not looking around.

Two tall, thin, whiskery men came around into view. They had mean-looking guns of full size for 45-scabbards in their right hands. They looked at Vannie and they looked around.

"Where's your hoss, pilgrim?"

"I ain't got no horse," Vannie replied.

"Shucks! You ain't hoofin' it in this country?"

"Only way I got's to hoof it!" Vannie answered, still nibbling.

"He's got a gun, too—If yuh look close, Mosey!" one said, in kind of an awed tone.

"Doggone! That's right, Cupfull—A gun—*that?*" Mosey broke into an enthusiastic laugh, reaching and plucking the 22-single-shot from Vannie's hip pocket.

There it was, with a grip for a fair hand, a tapered 6-inch round barrel, and a tip-up button dingus. In the barrel was a piece of copper tube, size of a birdquill. It had a bullet big around as a BB shot.

"Now ain't that comical!" Mocy exclaimed. "I bet yuh're from back East—Ohio, or Jersey, or Maine, one of them foreign countries."

"No suh," Vannie shook his head, "I'm from Texas!"

"Texas—an' a twenty-two for a gun! Ho, ho!" the two men burst into a loud laugh. Then three other men came riding down the buffalo trail driving three pack horses ahead of them, and three or four other spare horses switching and prancing around.

"Look boys!" Mosey waved his arm, hooking down, "this feller says he's from Texas! An' he's packin' a twenty-two, one-shot gun, too!"

The little pop gun was passed around, the five men standing on the ground, having shared the two prairie chiken breasts, legs and wings with one another, tearing the frames apart. They looked with first one eye and then the other.

"So he's from Texas, eh?" Cupfull repeated, shaking his head. "Ain't it funny how some little runt of a tenderfoot, walkin' aroun', pretends he's from somewhere, special, now? Why, I bet this feller'd claim he's a Texas Ranger, if yuh asked him!"

"That's so—Hey, pilgrim?" Mosey's voice inflected up. "Now, ain't it the truth yuh're not only a Texan, but yuh're a Texas Ranger?"

"A Ranger don't never lie, yuh know!" Cupfull added with a grin.

"An' a Texas Ranger's always proud he is one, too!" another man said. Two voices laughed and went on, "Jes' so, Jud—Take a Ranger an' he ain't never 'shamed he's a Ranger, come snakes or high water!"

"So yuh ain't a Ranger, be yuh?" Mosey inquired, an ugly glint in his eyes.

"Oh, yes! I'm a Texas Ranger!"

The man in hunting boots, beside the little bird-toasting fire nodded, and smiled. All five of the men who had come down the trail threw their heads back, laughing a guffaw that could be heard a mile.

"A man who can talk thataway shore is from Texas!" somebody choked gleefully. "When a Texan does lie it's shore a big 'un! Hi-i-i! On foot, flat-heel boots, an' a twenty-two pop—a Texas Ranger—Hey—what's goin' on!"

There stood this pilgrim. He had pulled two shortguns from the belts of bystanders. He had stepped back three steps. Now he was turning the muzzles of those two 45s this and that way, belt-high pointing at the five men who had gathered close to look at that 22-pop.

"I'm a Texas Ranger, shore enough!" the pilgrim proclaimed. "There's the paper—"

Mosey himself picked up the flutter sheet from an Austin blank appointment book. He opened it up, blinked the sunshine out of his eyes and head that 'Know all by these presents that Jesse Lou Vannie is hereby and by these presents appointed a Texas Ranger—at Austin.'

"By gosh it's a darned lie—a forgery!" Jud the Canary sang, and the five clustered men sprang back, stooping, going for their guns.

MOSEY JACK and Cupfull had empty scabbards. Jud the Canary and the Barbed Wire Twins filled their hands, but only one of them managed to shoot. Jud's gun plugged into dry sand and puffed up

a little cloud of dust. The three men went down together. Mosey Jack and Cupfull gulped their Adam's apples, putting their hands up, disarmed—helpless.

"We'll be amblin' back south—I will! Yuh'll keep me company—dead or alive, Mosey—which?" Vannie asked.

"Alive—Me!" Cupfull nodded, and Mosey followed suit.

"I'm takin' yore word, boys," Vannie said, "I'll take their guns—Yuh'll load 'em—two on their horses, and one on that light-loaded packer. I want a horse to ride, myse'f—stylish like."

"Then that twenty-two pop's just a bait to distract us!" Mosey said it as if it was the huskiest curse he ever said.

"Why—It had to be," Vannie answered as he shrugged. "You boys was gettin' to be bad, real bad. It was a mistake—comin' to Texas."

"Texas—what are yuh talkin' about? This is No Man's Land! Don't yuh know that, mister?" Mosey yipped. "Yuh ain't got no right—"

"Listen, Mosey! I got eight six-guns an' more specially that twenty-two oneshot, backed up by a Texas Ranger commission," Vannie said. "Was the paper makin' a real gun of that twenty-two, or wasn't it?"

The two outlaws stood staring at the ground thoughtfully. Their three companions lay where they'd fallen. They were themselves disarmed. A Texan had come at them, barehanded, practically, and a piece of paper in his pocket—but a Ranger's commission printed on it. A Texas Ranger—they'd forced his hand, demanding the truth. Five to one—and he'd taken them, slam-bang!

"Mister, I always said if it was a Ranger, all he needed was a short squirt, an' I'd surrender!" Mosey exclaimed, sincerely.

The ride back down across the No Man's Land-Texas boundary was slow but steady. The animals with inert packs walked ahead, the two outlaw prisoners came next and following along behind was Ranger Vannie. Vannie had taken their words. He had let them ride open and free-handed. All he insisted on was they keep close and not move sudden.

The trail kittering down to the Lost Fork camp was long and wild. Even a Ranger couldn't go that far, keeping awake with two prisoners. Ranger Vannie headed down to Dallam Court. He'd been awake four nights and three days. He'd bitten his tongue and gnawed his lips, keeping awake. He rode into that dusty main street and came to the Court Square. Ahead of him, strung out in single file, were the spare horses, the three pack horses, the three men dead on their saddles and the two prisoners, riding head up, insolent, arrogant, mean—taken by a Ranger!

Reeling in his saddle, Jesse Lou Vannie searched for an officer, sheriff, city marshal—somebody to take over. Coming down from the courthouse steps, was a perky little man with a wide hat and cold green eyes, wearing a small button—the dimmed eyes of the Ranger presently realized that that was a Lone Star cut out of a two-bit piece. That little man was a Texas Ranger—He was Captain Judson Murk!

Murk had got to thinking and worrying about that 22-gun appointee from Austin Headquarters that he'd tracked him clear up to Dallam Court. Nobody had seen Vannie going through, though his tracks were around the edge of the town, walking after taking a stage!

Now here he came, riding, worn out, blowing dust out of his mouth, after taking all five of Mosey Jack's gang. Captain Murk took over. Private Ranger Jesse Lou Vannie fell down off his horse and curled up, going to sleep in the shadow of a cottonwood tree.

When Captain Murk returned from putting the outlaws into the county jail and the Dallam undertaker's morgue, he brought two large Indian blankets with him. He rolled the dead-weary Vannie over onto one of the blankets, and spread the other one over him, tucking it in.

Then Murk leaned his back against the cottonwood tree and whittled a toothpick. Once or twice he held up his hand and said;

"Sh-h!"

That was enough. Nobody uttered a sound, much less a whoop. This Texas Ranger private had earned his rest anywhere he darn pleased! His Cap'n was there to see he got it, too! You, betcha!

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Doc's heart skipped. The coin had a nick

DOC SWAP'S DOUBLE DARE

By BEN FRANK

A hot-headed boast sends the tradin' hombre up the swapping trail to find a plumb troublesome owlhoot!

OLD DOC SWAP, waddling down Dry Bluff's one and only street, reckoned that he'd never before seen things look so calm and trouble-free. Why, even the flies seemed to be taking a holiday. The wind had died down to a mere whisper. It was actually too calm and peaceful. It was like the calm before the storm. Like—

The old swapper's waddling progress ended abruptly in front of the express office as a result of Lou Loomis' rasping voice reaching him via the open door.

"Yes, sir, by cracky!" he heard the sawed-off agent say. "What we need is another sheriff! MacLoyd's had that owlhooter in jail a hull week an' ain't found out yet where he hid the money."

Doc peered into the express office and got a glimpse of Lou Loomis' audience—Deacon Plumb, Jed Williams, and Ed Preston, all influential men in Bluff County politics. And they were all nodding in agreement to what the expressman had just said.

The peace and calm of the day vanished. A fly buzzed about Doc's left ear. A stir of wind threw dust into his ragged, white

whiskers. The happy-go-lucky expression left his round, ruddy face, and his bright blue eyes lost their twinkle.

Not in a thousand years would old Doc Swap openly admit that he felt anything but dislike for the sheriff of Bluff County, his rival in the two occupations dearest to his heart—fiddle playin' and swappin'. But right at the moment he felt a strong and sudden concern for his friendly enemy, Sheriff MacLoyd. Those four hombres in the express office could, Doc knew, cause MacLoyd to lose the next election. Deep down in his heart, Doc didn't want that to happen to his old crony.

A week before, the express office had been held up, the thief getting away with the Hamilton Mine payroll. MacLoyd and his two deputies had promptly rounded up the owlhooter, but not before he'd hidden the loot. So far, the thief had maintained a stony silence concerning the hiding place, and now people were beginning to talk.

"Not only did that jasper get away with the payroll," Lou Loomis went on savagely, "but he also got ten dollars of my own money. An' one of them dollars was my lucky silver dollar, the one with the nick in it!"

Deacon Plumb cleared his throat.

"Reckon MacLoyd's slippin' right fast," he rumbled.

Doc moved away from the door, thinking that it was about time MacLoyd was learning what people were saying. Swearing into his ragged, white whiskers, he turned his shuffling footsteps toward the sun-warped cracker-box jail.

The weary-looking unpainted symbol of Bluff County law squatted on the unshaded, courthouse lawn. A span of mules stood at the hitch-rail in front of the building. At one side, a roan saddle horse bearing the Double O brand switched at flies, and near the horse stood a pale-faced kid of ten or twelve. The boy was so busy admiring the roan that he failed to look up when Doc passed by.

DOC mounted the three wooden steps that led to the rickety porch, and he barged into the two-by-four office of the jail.

Sheriff MacLoyd sat behind his battered desk, his bony face wreathed in smiles, his right thumb hooked in a pocket of his gravy-spotted vest. He lifted his pale eyes to Doc's face, uncrossed his bony, bowed legs and lost his smile.

"I'm busy," he said tartly.

Doc snorted. "Listen, yuh hard-headed ol—"

His voice trailed off as his eyes lit on a stranger sitting in a chair near the fly-specked window.

MacLoyd's thin face colored slightly, and he gave his handlebar mustache an angry twist.

"No manners," he said to the stranger in an apologetic undertone loud enough for Doc to hear. Then, "Mr. King, this fat ol' goat is Doc Swap."

Mr. King seemed unimpressed. He lifted a pale hand and murmured—

"Pleased to meet you, my good man."

MacLoyd re-crossed his bean-pole legs, leaned over the desk and sent a stream of tobacco juice neatly through the door.

"As I was sayin', Mr. King," he went on, ignoring Doc completely, "yuh can't go wrong, buildin' a house in the south end of Dry Bluffs. Best neighborhood there is. Why, I even live there myself!"

Mr. King chuckled.

"Glad to take your word for it, sheriff. Any man who can start out with a runty pig and swap till he ends up with a span of mules is smart enough for me to listen to."

Doc felt a quiver steal over him. So the mules outside belonged to MacLoyd as the result of some fancy swapping. Doc blinked twice rapidly and made up his mind that he'd own those mules before the week was over.

Not that he needed a span of mules, but he and MacLoyd had been trying to out-swap each other for forty years. The rivalry was deep-seated. Anything one owned the other tried to get by shrewd trading.

The sheriff leaned back in his squeaky swivel chair, wiped his face with a large bright-red silk handkerchief, and smiled condescendingly at Doc.

"Yuh see," he explained, "Mr. King has come from the East fer his wife's health. He's goin' to build a big, fine house in Dry Bluffs. I was just tellin' him how my end of town is higher class than yore neighborhood."

Doc felt his face flush.

"Phooey!" he said. "The north end is far ahead of—"

"The sheriff is a smart man," Mr. King said with a lift of his pale hand. "Anybody who can turn a pig into a span of—"

Doc didn't hear the rest because of his rising anger. So MacLoyd, besides being a smart trader, lived in the best end of town! Both ideas were a bad taste in Doc's mouth, and he made up his mind right then that Mr. King's new house would be built in his, Doc's, end of Dry Bluffs.

"There's a likely place fer a house near where I live," Doc said. "Be glad to show it to yuh, Mr. King."

The Easterner shook his head.

"Thanks, but I'll follow the sheriff's advice."

The smile on MacLoyd's bony face deepened.

"Reckon a good house like Mr. King's goin' to build will raise property values all around it," he said. "He's goin' to build across the street from me. I reckon—"

Footsteps clattered on the porch, and the pale-faced kid whom Doc had seen admiring the Double-O horse burst into the room like a small cyclone.

"Pa," he shrieked, "besides a puppy, I want a horse! A horse like that one—"

"Now, Junior," Mr. King said, "we're talking and—"

"I want a horse and a puppy. I want a horse—"

"All right, some day," Mr. King cut in. "Now run along."

Junior pouted. "I don't want to." He stared at Sheriff MacLoyd. "I want to wear the ugly man's star."

The sheriff's face turned a bright red. Mr. King looked extremely fussed. Doc smiled happily.

"Mr. King," Doc said, "yuh got a fine boy!"

Mr. King got to his feet and shook a finger at the boy.

"Shoo!" he said angrily.

Junior turned and fled.

"Sorry, sheriff," Mr. King apologized. "Of course, Junior doesn't realize what a smart man you are, and—"

"Phooey!" Doc said a second time. "Anybody can take a pig an' swap around till he get's a pair of flea-bit mules."

MacLoyd glared at Doc.

"If yuh started with the mules, yuh'd end up with a flea-bit pig," he declared with a loud sniff.

Doc shook a round fist under the sheriff's long nose.

"Yo're the one who's gonna end up with a pig," he snorted. Yuh dad-blasted—"

DOC never could talk when he was angry. Sheriff MacLoyd grinned happily. Nothing he liked better than riling Doc.

The old swapper found his voice.

"I could take anything yuh got," he stormed, "an' in three days swap it into a wagonload of stuff, an' get yore mules to boot!"

MacLoyd's pale eyes glittered. He lifted his six feet of skin-covered bones from the chair, walked with great dignity to a far corner of the room, and wrapped his long fingers around the slick handle of a worn-out broom.

"Anything?" he murmured. "Even this?"

Doc was too angry to think of consequences.

"Anything!" he barked.

MacLoyd held out the old broom.

"Here yuh are, yuh ol' windbag. Mr. King can be a witness to this big talk of yores. Do yore stuff, Doc."

Doc took the broom, thinking he'd like to bend it over MacLoyd's bony head. But he didn't. Instead, he swept off his fancy Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered this one of the high-lights of his career—and made a deep bow to Mr. King.

"I reckon I'll be seein' yuh again," he said. "Mebbe yuh'll want to borrow them mules from me to haul lumber fer the new house yuh'll be buildin' in my end of town."

With that, he slapped his hat back on his shiny bald head clear down to his ears, turned, and slammed through the door.

By the time he reached his neat cottage at the edge of Dry Bluffs, he'd had time enough to cool off. With the cooling off came sanity. Staring at the old broom in his hand, he knew that he'd done some mighty fancy and foolish boasting. In fact, he reckoned he'd put himself on the spot. If he didn't make good, Sheriff MacLoyd would never let him or anyone else in Dry Bluffs forget it.

There was just one thing for Doc to do, and he knew it. He had to go to Sugar Valley on a "swappin' spree" and try to make good his boast. Nesters were beginning to settle up Sugar Valley. Nesters were swappers.

Cussing softly into his white whiskers, the old swapper hooked his team of sleek, matched bays to the covered wagon in which he carried his swappin' goods. Fifteen minutes later he was on his way, the old broom rattling around on the floor of the empty,

covered wagon. It wasn't until he drove onto the Sugar Valley trail that he remembered why he had gone to see MacLoyd in the first place. But the way he felt now, he didn't care how the election went, just so MacLoyd lost.

Doc made his first stop at Dad Blameit's side-hill cabin. Old Dad, by hauling water from Sugar Creek for irrigation, managed to raise some right fancy vegetables for the citizens of Dry Bluffs. At the moment he was down on his hands and knees, punching holes in the ground with a short stick and inserting tomato plants into the holes.

Long white beard waving in the wind, he glanced up at Doc.

"Dad-blamed room-a-ticks has took me in the back," he said. "Ever' time I bend over to punch a hole, my back hurts worse'n a cinder in a tight shoe."

"Age," Doc soothed, "does things to a feller. Ain't so spry myself. Do my hole punchin' with a sharpened broomstick. Saves wear and tear on my back."

"I ain't got no ol' broomstick."

"Nothin' better fer hole punchin'. Why, I can punch a thousand tomato holes in no time a-tall with one. Well, what do yuh know!" Doc's innocent blue eyes widened. "I got an al' broomstick right here in my wagon. Now, how do yuh reckon that ever happened?"

Doc picked the old broom up in his stubby fingers, fished out a jackknife, and began to sharpen the end.

"Beats all," he went on. "Like speakin' of the devil, and there he is."

"Reckon yuh're goin' to throw that stick away," Dad Blameit said hopefully.

"Why, no." Doc looked unhappy. "Just happened to remember I been needin' a new hole-puncher fer sometime."

"Give yuh two bits fer that ol' broom," Dad Blameit offered.

"Ain't no hand to sell things," Doc said, his keen old eyes moving over the scene in search of swapping goods. "Might do a little tradin'."

"Ain't got much to trade," Dad Blameit said cautiously. "A few extra plants, mebbe. Not many."

"Wouldn't expect many," Doc said blandly. "Mebbe a dozen."

WHEN Doc left Dad Blameit, the oldster was punching holes in the ground with the broomstick. Doc was the owner of a dozen each of tomato and cabbage plants, and an old icepick that he had absolutely no use for. But he hadn't been able to resist talking the old gardener into throwing it in to boot. Doc was a great to-boot swapper.

Just as Doc headed his sleek bays onto the Sugar Creek trail, he met Ham Brady. Ham was one of Sheriff MacLoyd's occasional deputies. He trapped in winters and loafed in the summers. He wore a squirrel-skin cap through all seasons, indoors and out, night and day. The deputy, his stubbly jaws chomping at a huge cud of fine-cut, was limping along with a badly used saddle over his shoulders and a sad-looking bronc trailing along behind.

Doc pulled to a stop beside the man.

"Didn't know yuh could walk, Ham," he murmured.

Ham dropped the saddle, raked sweat from his red face, and cussed with ease and great force.

"Stopped back at the ford to drink some water," he explained, "an' while I was down on my knees drinkin', that fool hoss laid down an' rolled, saddle an' all. Busted about forty-'leven different straps on my saddle, an' I ain't got no knife to punch holes so's I can fix 'em. Doc, yuh—"

Doc had something in his pudgy fingers. The icepick.

Ham pawed the tail of the squirrel cap out of his eyes.

"Doc, is that a leather punch?"

"Why, yes an' no," Doc answered. "But I reckon it would do the job. Well, got to be goin'. G'by, Ham."

"Hey," the deputy yelled, "how about me usin' that—"

"Really ain't got time to wait while—"

"Okay, Doc," Ham said, a look of defeat coming to his wind-burned face. He unloaded a huge gusher of tobacco juice and added humbly, "I'll swap yuh fer it."

Ham got the icepick. Doc got a sack of fine-cut, a skinning knife, and an old pair of horseshoes to boot.

"I reckon ol' MacLoyd's about ready to pack up an' move out of his office," Doc said as he tossed the horseshoes into his wagon.

Ham was in a bad humor. He cussed and tested the point of the icepick on his thumb.

"Don't worry about MacLoyd," he said. "He made that owlhooter talk. Now it's just a matter of goin' out an' pickin' up the loot. In fact, Mac's gone fer it now."

"Do tell?" Doc murmured, feeling some-

what let down.

"Yep. MacLoyd's a mighty smart man. A swapper, too."

Doc knew that Ham was baiting him, but in spite of that he felt his anger rise.

"Smart like a dead skunk," he said, jogging his bays into a surprised trot.

He had an idea that Ham was grinning behind the tail of his cap. "Dad-blasted smart Aleck!" Doc thought. "Hope he busts that icepick."

Ham let out a ten-dollar cuss word. Doc had gotten his wish.

That afternoon the old swapper turned his bays into Ike Johnson's rutty driveway and pulled up in front of the unpainted cabin. Ike, pipe fogging, stood leaning against the garden fence, watching his wife, Millie, pull weeds out of a row of green onions.

Doc swept off his fancy Stetson and bowed. "Right nice day fer gardenin'," he observed.

"Not bad," Ike agreed readily.

Millie, her face red and sweat-streaked, looked up.

"Fiddlesticks!" she said. "Nothin' good about it. Cutworms et off all my cabbages and tomatoes. Weeds outgrowin' the beans. Corn ain't up, an—"

"Tomatoes an' cabbages is right important fer gardens," Doc said, his round face filled with deep concern. "Yuh had ought to get some more plants, Millie."

"Been tryin' to get Ike to go to town fer some."

Ike sighed deeply around his pipestem.

"Seems like a long way to go fer some measly plants. Besides, I kinda got a tired feelin' today."

"Got to get my own garden started," Doc said, lifting up the cabbage and tomato plants he'd gotten from Dad Blameit.

The pipe slipped from Ike's gaping mouth.

"Look, Doc," he wheezed, "why don't yuh sell them plants to us an' save me a trip to town?"

Doc shook his head sadly. "These're extra special. Besides, I ain't no hand to sell things." His eyes brightened. "Might swap, though."

Doc left the Johnson homestead minus his plants, but he did have two loaves of Millie's fresh-baked bread, two cans of homemade sausage, a box of pancake flour, and a pair of old lace curtains he'd talked the woman into throwing in to boot.

[*Turn page*]

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THAT evening he made an early camp in his favorite spot on Sugar Creek, built a fire, and began to fill the quiet air with the fragrance of frying sausage, pancakes, and coffee. Just as he poured dough for the second batch of cakes, Sheriff MacLoyd came rattling up in his old buggy.

The sheriff's bony face was slightly pale, and his eyes wore a haunted look.

Doc didn't miss a thing. He poked at the fire and said pleasantly—

"Fine evenin' fer buggy ridin'. Always thought I might take up buggy ridin' in my ol' age. Understand when a feller gets past his active years, buggy ridin' is the best—"

"Looky, yuh fat ol' goat-whiskered ninny," MacLoyd roared, "I ain't in no mood fer none of your in-sinner-atin'!"

Doc looked hurt.

"Why," he mumbled, "I didn't aim to rile yuh. Figured yuh'd be in a right good humor, now that yo've found the express money."

MacLoyd sighed heavily and wiped his perspiring face with his red silk handkerchief.

"Doc, I ain't found the money," he confessed. "I drove out where that sidewinder said he left it, an' I found the place, all right, but no money. Somebody beat me to it."

"Do tell!"

"Looks like I'm sunk, Doc. Reckon I won't get a dozen votes come next election."

Just then a little breeze carried the savory odors of Doc's cooking to the bean-pole sheriff. The sad expression on his long face turned to one of savage hunger, for MacLoyd, no matter how worried, never lost his appetite.

"Doc," he panted, "I ain't et all day. I'm so hungry I could eat a hoss collar, if it had gravy on it."

"Ain't got no extra hoss collar," Doc said, "but I'm goin' to make gravy. Sausage gravy!"

MacLoyd licked his thin lips. "Give yuh a dollar fer a right fair feed."

"Ain't got no need fer a dollar," Doc said. "Reckon yuh wouldn't consider a meal fer a span of mules?"

"I am a starved man," MacLoyd said with dignity, "but I ain't exactly starved crazy. An' yuh can go to—"

"Mebbe we can figure out somethin' else," Doc sighed.

After considerable wrangling and no little swearing, the two old rivals reached an agreement. For the meal Doc got the sheriff's red silk handkerchief, a pair of rubber boots, a fancy dog collar, and a motheaten laprobe.

Just as the sheriff finished eating, a horse clattered along the trail and came up in a cloud of gray dust. The rider, Joe Bean, slid from the saddle to the ground with a thud. Joe was MacLoyd's second deputy, a lengthy young hombre with slick hair and fancy ideas about his appearance.

"Sheriff," he yelled, "we got us a kidnaping on our hands! Somebody has stole Mr. King's boy, Junior!"

MacLoyd's face turned a shade paler.

"Always," he groaned, "troubles hit me in bunches. Now who would want to steal that little monkey?"

"Mebbe," Doc suggested mildly, "he ain't stole. Mebbe he just wandered away."

"Well," Joe Bean admitted, "we ain't sure he was kidnaped. That's just my idea. What we do know is that the kid's gone, an' his folks is raisin' ol' Ned."

MacLoyd got wearily to his feet.

"Come on, Joe," he mumbled. "Le's go an' look fer the brat."

Doc chuckled.

"Smart boy, Junior," he said under his breath.

"I ain't et yet," Joe said unhappily. "Mebbe if Doc was a-mind to cook up some grub, I could eat an' then catch up with yuh along the trail, Sheriff."

Doc's keen blue eyes feasted on Joe's silver ring.

"Why, Joe, I reckon we could fix up a deal," he murmured.

A half an hour later, his stomach full, Joe Bean rode away from Doc's dying campfire, leaving behind the silver ring, a gold watch chain, and a dog-eared book about baldness, its cause and cure.

Pans and tin dishes washed and stacked neatly on a stump, Doc took a sample of Ham Brady's fine-cut, and as he chewed, he made inventory of his accumulations. A sack of fine-cut, a skinning knife, pair of horseshoes, lace curtains, silk handkerchief, rubber boots, dog collar, lap robe, silver ring, watch chain, a dog-eared book. Not bad, considering that he'd started with a worn-out broom.

But the old swapper was far from satisfied. Sheriff MacLoyd's mules seemed as far out of reach as ever. And to this time, he'd devised no way to persuade the wealthy Mr.

King to build a house in the north end of Dry Bluffs. But there loomed one ray of hope—the sheriff was in trouble clear up to his oversized Adam's apple. When MacLoyd had trouble, anything could happen. And usually did.

NEXT morning, looking at the fancy dog collar, Doc got an idea. After breakfast, he hooked his bays to the covered wagon and headed on down the Sugar Creek trail. Mid-morning found him at "Dog-ears" Dover's tar-paper shack.

Immediately Dog-ears' twenty-odd dogs surrounded the wagon and set up a clamorous greeting. Dog-ears himself appeared at his cabin door, a good-natured grin on his seamed face. The man had moved in recently from Missouri, bringing along his assortment of dogs and a desire to work as little as possible.

Doc, the fancy dog collar in his fingers, slid to the ground, accidentally stepping on a brown pup's tail. The pup set up a howl and was joined by the other dogs.

"Shut up!" Dog-ears bellowed, and the dogs became quiet.

"Figured yuh would be the feller to swap this collar to," Doc said. "A man with a yardful of dogs—"

Dog-ears took the collar, stared at it, and slowly shook his bushy head as he handed it back.

"Doc," he said sadly, "if I was to get that thar colla' an' put it on one o' my dawgs, all the rest of 'em would be jealous. Why, I reckon that one colla' would likely spoil all the peace an' happiness o' my entire establishment."

"Hadn't thought of that," Doc admitted.

"Yep," Dog-ears expanded, "dawgs is like humans when it comes to bein' jealous. Why, I mind one time back in Missouri—Say, Doc, yo'll ain't got an extra chaw, have yo'? I'm fresh out, an' my dawgs likes me better when I'm a-chewin'."

For the sack of fine-cut Doc obtained an old lantern, a pitchfork, and the brown puppy to boot. As he drove on his way, he put the fancy collar around the puppy's shaggy neck. Vaguely he recalled that Mr. King's boy, the disappearing Junior, had wanted a puppy and a saddle horse. Funny about the boy's disappearance, but by now, Doc reckoned, he'd likely been found.

[*Turn page*]

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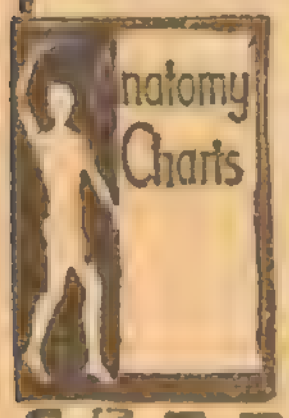

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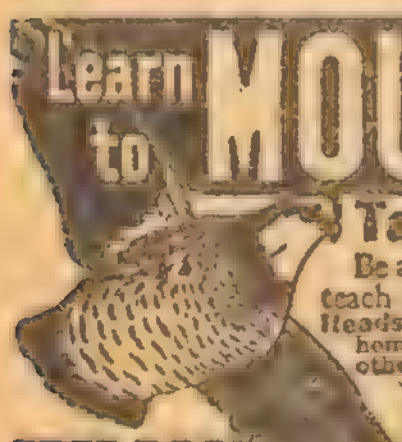

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As the wagon creaked along, Doc's face filled with unhappy frown-wrinkles. He felt that he was getting no place fast—not making his fancy boasting good. He guessed that for once in his life he'd bit off more than he could chew, that his trip into Sugar Valley was likely to be a plumb failure.

He cussed into his whiskers.

"Ain't no fool like an ol' fool," he thought. "I should never have let that schemin' coyote of a sheriff get my dander up. Come election time, suits me if he don't get no vote but his own!"

Of course Doc didn't mean a word of it, but cussing Sheriff MacLoyd always made him feel better.

An hour later he saw a rider approaching along the trail. The horseman turned out to be Chuck Dooley, a ranny from the Double O. Chuck was riding his own roan bearing the Double O brand and leading a knock-kneed, sway-back paint pony with a two-dollar saddle creaking against its bony ribs.

"Gone into the hoss-buyin' business?" Doc asked.

Chuck grinned, exposing an empty tooth socket, which he'd acquired in a fist fight several years before.

"Durnedest things happen to me, Doc," he said. "Left my hoss tied in front of the jail whilst I went into the Palace fer a shot of forty-rod. When I come fer my hoss las' night, he'd got hisself loose an' was gone. This mornin' I bought this ol' nag to ride home on. An' what do yuh think?"

Doc shook his head.

"I found my own hoss tied to a tree back along the trail a-ways. Reckon somebody found him an' tied him up fer me."

"Mebbe so," Doc murmured, but the wheels inside his head were beginning to spin.

Chuck pulled his hat from his thinning hair. "Beats all—"

"Gettin' a little bald, ain't yuh?" Doc observed.

Chuck sobered.

"Uh huh. Kinda worries me, too, Doc," the ranny said.

Doc pulled out the book about how to keep hair from slipping. He sighed audibly.

"I only wisht I'd have had this book when I was yore age, Chuck," he said sadly. "Mebbe if I'd had it, my head wouldn't look like first cousin to a bowlin' ball."

When Chuck Dooley and Doc Swap parted,

Chuck had the book, and Doc had the old broken-down saddle horse. And something to boot. An idea!

He drove to where Chuck had found his horse tied to a tree, slid from the spring seat and began to search along the ground. A couple of minutes later, he found what he was looking for—small footprints in the mud near the ford that crossed the creek. Grinning widely, Doc squared his round shoulders. He'd remembered Mr. King's Junior admiring the Double O horse. He reckoned he knew now how the boy had vanished from Dry Bluffs.

DOC climbed back into the covered wagon, drove across the creek, and followed it to Ed Lunt's homestead. Just as he expected, he saw Junior in the front yard playing with Ed's three kids.

Ed's wife, Minnie, stood in the doorway. She lifted her eyes to Doc's face, and the old swapper gave her a deep bow.

"Looks like yore family has growed some," he observed.

Minnie shook her head in bewilderment and looked at Junior.

"Didn't grow him," she said. "He just come out of nowhere. Says he's Daniel Boone an' was out scoutin' fer Indians. Says they killed his horse. He saw our light, so he come to warn us of danger. We kept him all night. Figured we'd take him home if we could ever find out who he is. Ed went across the creek awhile ago, but they wasn't no horse." Minnie lowered her voice. "Mebbe he's touched in the head, Doc."

"Not likely," Doc said. His eyes roved over the house, stopped on a curtainless window.

Minnie had followed his gaze.

"Our dog chased the cat up them curtains," she said. "Tore 'em to shreds."

After swapping the lace curtains to Minnie for two hens and a runty pig, Doc turned his attention to Junior.

"Look, Daniel Boone," he said, "I got a puppy an' a saddle hoss. Mebbe if yuh was to go back to town with me, yo're pa would buy 'em fer yuh."

Junior's pale face brightened. Without argument he climbed into the covered wagon and made himself at home beside Doc on the sagging spring seat.

"You're Sittin' Bull," he said to Doc.

[*Turn page*]

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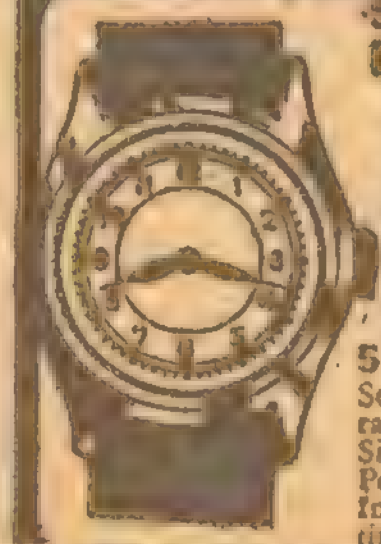

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"You're my prisoner, an' I'm takin' you back to jail. Giddap!"

Doc chuckled and slapped the lines across the bay's rumps.

They rode in silence for a time. Then the boy asked—

"How'd you get that puppy an' the pony?"

"Swapped fer 'em," Doc said. Then he explained the fine points of the swapping business to the boy.

"I'm going to be a swapper," Junior decided. "From now on call me Swapper instead of Daniel Boone."

They pulled up in front of Homer Prutt's bachelor quarters. Homer, besides farming in a haphazard way, invented things, most of which never worked.

"Now's as good a time as any to try yore hand at swappin'," Doc said. "Take this lantern into that little buildin' back of the cabin. Yo'll find Homer in there inventin' somethin'. Tell him he needs a lantern so's he can work nights, an' swap it to him fer somethin'. An' don't ferget yuh gotta get some boot!"

Junior obeyed with alacrity. In less than five minutes he was back minus the lantern.

"Didn't have no luck swappin'," the boy said. "Homer says he's retired from inventin', but he give me a dollar for the lantern so's I'd go away an' let him sleep."

Junior held up a silver dollar. Doc felt his heart skip a beat. That dollar had a deep nick in the edge. He'd seen it many times before. It was Lou Loomis' Lucky dollar—the one that had been stolen along with the other loot taken from the express office!

"Swapper," Doc said huskily to the boy, "yuh go take a little ride on that hoss while I go have a talk with Homer."

"You bet!" Junior said, and he proceeded to climb aboard the bony old horse.

Doc went around to Homer's workshop. The inventor lay stretched out on the floor, sleeping soundly. Doc woke him with a gouge in the ribs.

Homer sat up, put on his thick-lens spectacles, and glared.

"What's the idea, Doc?" he yipped. "Can't a man who's retired from work sleep without somebody comin' an'—"

"Homer," Doc said severely, "I heard of an inventor feller who retired once. Seems he accidently found a heap of money hid somewheres. Howsomever, it turned out this money had been stole, an' the first thing

this feller knowed, he had retired fer twenty years in a jail cell. That feller sure wished he'd stuck to his inventin' instead of retirin' on somebody else's money!"

Homer's face had gone a pasty white.

"Doc," he husked, "how'd yuh know—"

"Don't know nothin'," Doc said. "Howsomever, while I take a walk down to yore barn an' back, if a certain amount of money should happen to get into my wagon, I'd see that it got back to the right party. An' no questions asked! Of course, if that money don't get into my wagon, I'll have to have a little conference with Sheriff MacLoyd—even if he ain't right bright."

Doc turned on his heel and waddled toward Homer's sagging barn. He didn't look back. When he returned to the shop, Homer was busy working on one of his inventions.

"Kinda lost my hankerin' to retire," Homer said. "Makin' a contraption to tell when it's going to rain."

Doc nodded in a friendly fashion and turned toward his covered wagon.

"By the by," Homer called, "I noticed a small wooden box in the back of your wagon. Might be kind of valuable."

"Much obliged, Homer," Doc said.

ALONG toward sundown old Doc Swap pulled his outfit to a stop in front of the Dry Bluffs Hotel, and a small boy leaped down from the wagon and yelled—

"Pa! Ma! Come here! The smartest man in the world's brought me home! He's got a puppy and a horse for me!"

Mr. and Mrs. King came running from the hotel. Doc swept off his fancy Stetson and made a deep bow. The man and the woman hugged the boy until he squealed.

"Mighty fine boy," Doc smiled happily. "A real swapper, too. Swapped me the idea of yuh folks buildin' yore new house in my end of town fer that ridin' hoss and the pup. Now, what do yuh think of that?"

"That's right!" Junior said. "I won't live no place else but in Doc's end of town!"

At that moment, a long-legged, bony-faced man came hobbling across the street. He was Sheriff MacLoyd. He came around the covered wagon just in time to see Mr. King shaking Doc's fat hand warmly.

"What's the big to-do about?" MacLoyd gulped.

"Why," Doc answered carelessly, "Mr.

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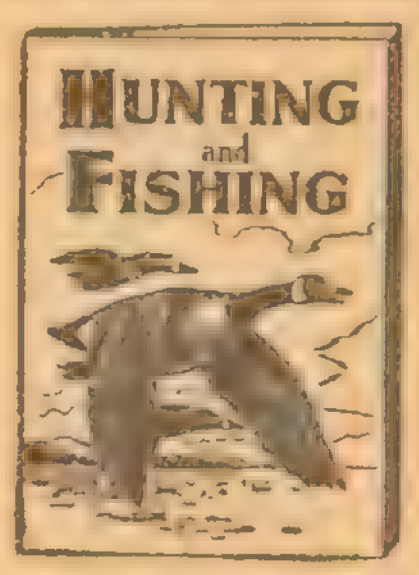

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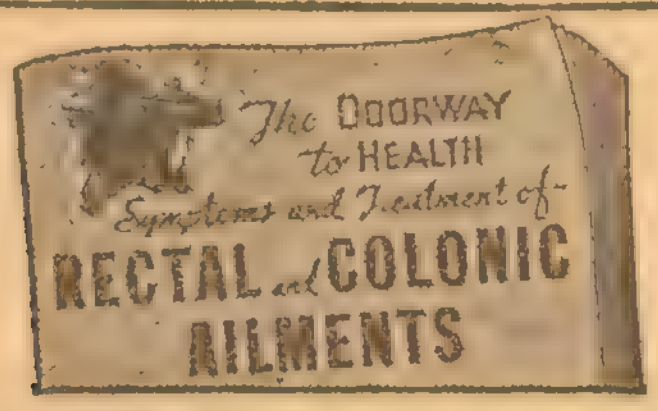

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King was just tellin' me he's decided to build his house next to mine. Says he thinks he'll like that neighborhood better'n—"

"Just a minute!" MacLoyd cut in. "I don't know exactly what's goin' on, but I do know yuh ain't got my span of mules yet. I reckon yuh ain't made yore braggin' good, an'—"

"Come real close," Doc said in a hoarse whisper.

MacLoyd, scowling suspiciously, bent his bony back until one big red ear was close to Doc's whiskery mouth.

"There's a wooden box in my wagon," Doc whispered. "Seems that a feller found a wad of money an' put it in this box fer me to return to a certain express company. Howsomever, if yuh'd like to return this here money an' get all the credit an' take a runty pig off my hands, I reckon yuh could."

MacLoyd's breath wheezed in and out of his long nose.

"Doc," he whispered hoarsely, "yuh mean—"

Doc nodded. "Of course I'd expect a little somethin' to boot fer that pig. An' fer savin' yore mangy hide at the next election. Mebbe, them mules to boot—"

MacLoyd swallowed half a cud of tobacco, and his Adam's apple did a nose-dive.

"Why, yuh barrel-shaped ol'—Okay, Doc," he wheezed. "Where's that pig?"

As Doc drove homeward through the gathering darkness, he reckoned he'd never seen things look more calm and trouble-free. In fact, things looked downright beautiful. He himself even felt beautiful inside, but he reckoned that was because he'd turned a worn-out broom into a lot of swappin' goods, including a span of fair mules and the promise of a fine new house in his end of town.

Utterly Useless is his name, but Old Doc Swap's weary helper proves plumb useful when tradin' hits a snag in

DOC SWAP HIRES A HAND

By BEN FRANK

Coming Next Month!

(Continued from page 10)

phase of life. He learned to suffer without complaint.

The only thing resembling government as a guardian of public welfare was the tribal council. But the council pow-wows never made laws that repressed freedom or free thinking. It was a fumbling pursuit of happiness, the life of the Indian, but he managed to avoid lots of the troubles we more numerous folks know.

One thing sure, he was a better custodian of resources. Needing little, he took little. He never destroyed wantonly. He saw no sense in saving, therefore wasn't prey to greed and the myriad ugly sins and fears of modern mankind.

So would you gals and galluses rather be born a Twentieth Century American? Or an Indian of primitive times? Sometimes I figure that the Indian understood Mother Earth better, for all our proud boast of science and skill and learning and civilized progress. Never in the Indian's way of life would an era end as when ancient civilizations crumbled in Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria and Palestine.

National Wildlife Federation

The excesses in our own hasty, reckless way of life are recognized and understood by a small group of thoughtful men banded together in an organization called the National Wildlife Federation. Maybe you've seen the wildlife stamps they send out each year, maybe you've paid your dollar for a sheet of stamps to further the educational program of conservation.

It's a good way to spend a dollar, even if the voices of these wise and really public spirited men are lost nowadays in the great clamor for gain. As students of history, they know what befell those early civilizations. Their aim is to save us from the wrong kind of progress that ends in extinction.

It's a mighty deep subject when you get into it, but it's being taught in some schools under the head of citizenship. That word "wildlife" doesn't mean just game animals. It refers to the whole chain of creation—rivers, trees, the soil and the creatures large and small that are a vital part of productive wealth, like cogs in a giant wheel.

If you're interested in knowing more about conservation and its needs and how you can help, write to the National Wildlife Federation, Washington, D. C.

The English Sparrow

Here's something interesting about birds. It furnishes an example of how one creature

[*Turn page*]

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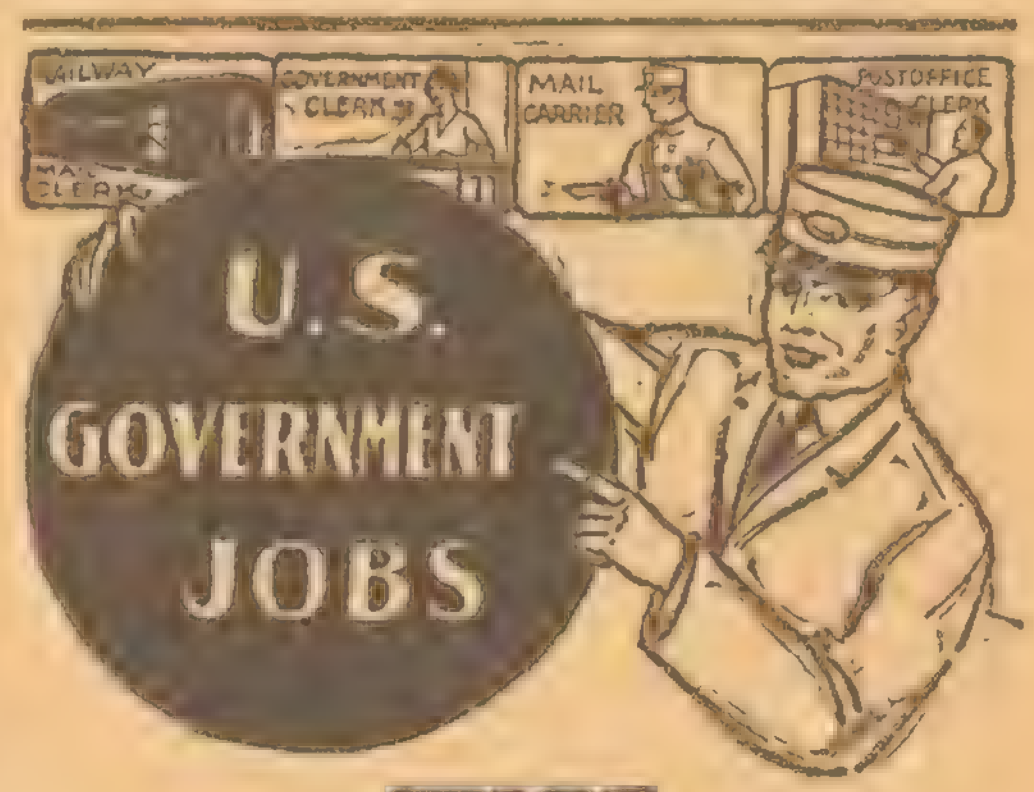

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depends on another in this chain-of-creation thing.

About a century ago, the English sparrow was introduced in Portland, Maine. This tireless worm hunter and bug snatcher has reached such numbers now around Portland, Oregon, clean across the continent, that growers blame it for damaging the lettuce and spinach crops.

Now how did English sparrows migrate West? Ornithologists say they followed the horse-drawn wagon trains of the pioneers.

What did the sparrow do when the horse and wagon went? For one thing, they gave up horse hair as nest-building material and even changed the shape of their nests in order to use various substitute materials. Then, from snatching flies and bugs that accumulated wherever horses were kept, they learned to peck many a quick lunch from insects trapped in the fronts of automobile radiators. You can see 'em at it in almost any city street, East or West!

The Apple-Eating Jackrabbit

That reminds me of the story about the jackrabbit that grew mighty fond of apples. He fed on apples dropped out of a tree until a deer came along, ate all the fallen apples and not only that but reached up and ate hanging apples before they dropped, before the jackrabbit had a chance at 'em.

Now what did this smart jackrabbit do? Well, one day he hopped onto the deer's antlers. Then when the deer reached up for a ripe, juicy apple, the jackrabbit helped himself, grabbed it before the deer could.

I don't know how it all ended. When the apples were all gone, I reckon!

That's all for now! Be seeing you.

—Captain Starr.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

WHERE can a real branded-in-the-hide puncher ride with the tang of sea salt as well as sage and pine in his nostrils but in the great State of Texas? For strange sights as well as unusual doings let us consider McMullen County. Here is what Jackson Cole has got to say about it in his next smashing, top-flight, action-packed novel about Ranger Jim Hatfield, entitled GOLD FOR THE DEAD and featured in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS:

"The southwestern part of McMullen County, Texas, is quite rough, with various elevations rising to the dignity of mountains. One of the most noted of these is Coffin Mountain, famous in tradition and legend. Bandits who prayed on traffic over the 'lower trail' from Laredo to San Antonio holed up on Coffin Mountain, as did other gentlemen

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of questionable antecedents and unpredictable futures.

"Coffin Mountain comes rightly by its sinister name. Enough bodies have desiccated in the dry air on and around the ominous hill to justify it. One can turn up dusty bones most anywhere in the thickets that clothe its sides, or find skeletons glaring from empty sockets in the gloom of the caves that honeycomb its cliffs and lodges.

"South of Coffin Mountain runs a trail from which the gray shimmer of the turbulent waters of the Gulf can be seen, a trail that slithers across the seventy terrible miles of parched desert to the Rio Grande. It follows the coast line for some distance, then turns sharply north to glide in the shadow of the mountains, and finally reach San Antonio. The *Pasajero*—travelers—*Trail*, it is named. Probably because, according to old-timers, gents riding it shore do travel!"

It is along this adventure trail that Ranger Hatfield rides in GOLD FOR THE DEAD, in answer to a summons from ranchers plagued by rustlers. Jackson Cole gives a clue to the mystery in his opening paragraphs, which we repeat here for the benefit of those who fancy themselves range detectives:

The trail curved away from the moaning bay and flowed north, with a slight trend to the east.

[*Turn page*]

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Still far ahead, the dark loom of Coffin Mountain shouldered the sky, and its vast shadow fell across the trail and darkened the chaparral beyond. Over the craggy summit of the mountain hung a red and gibbous moon, now burning luridly, now obscured by the racing cloud wrack. An owl whistled eerily from the top of a blasted pine. A disgruntled coyote answered with a querulous yipping. Somewhere a steer wailed thinly. A nighthawk almost brushed Hatfield's face with its silent wings, and its vicious scream set Goldy to snorting and dancing.

"Steady," Hatfield told his bronc. "That feller is just big talk. He wouldn't tackle anything heftier than a jackrabbit. That is, if he was a hawk at all and not the ghost of Lafitte or Moro, or some other of the old pirate gents who usta ride herd out there on the bay. This is just the sorta night yuh could expect them to be maverickin' around."

Goldy snorted his disgust at such superstition, and Hatfield chuckled. He gazed toward the black mass of the mountain and Goldy's head turned north. There was something grim and menacing about the huge, inchoate bulk, with the red moon hanging over it like a sullen danger light and the thickening cloud veil dimming the stars.

Suddenly the red light of the moon seemed to reflect from the mountain top as from a mirror. Swiftly the reddish glow under the irregular red disc spread and heightened. It became a leaping flame that danced and flickered. For several moments it burned fiercely, then abruptly it died to a smolder, a glow, and it vanished.

"Now, what in blazes?" wondered the Lone Wolf. "Why would somebody build a fire up top that pile of rocks and then douse it just as it got going good?"

When Jim Hatfield arrives in the small, dusty cowtown of Lorenzo, his efforts are directed toward getting a rancher out of jail, where the cattleman has been lodged as the result of a shooting. To the Lone Wolf the shooting appeared justified, but he is opposed by the town banker and other powerful men. Bit by bit, a mystery starts to build in Lorenzo, and Jim Hatfield finds himself unable to explain the strange conduct of certain citizens who wish to see his rancher friend hanged for murder.

His investigations lead him to help the Lazy D outfit drive a herd of stock through rustler country, and the Lone Wolf finds himself again in the vicinity of Coffin Mountain. The punchers and Dryden, their boss, spread blankets for the night, but Ranger Hatfield does not close his eyes beside them on the rocky slope. He lays watching the stars wheel westward.

The night was very still, with only the occasional contented rumbling of the cattle to break the silence. Hatfield began to grow drowsy. Suddenly, however, his eyes opened wide.

Far to the south and high in the sky, a winking light had suddenly sprung into being. It glowed

and swelled, flickered brightly for a few moments, then abruptly died to a glow and vanished.

"Now, what in blazes?" muttered the Ranger, very much awake. "It was on top that darn mountain down there, I'll bet a peso. Just the same as the one I saw the night I rode into this section."

He continued to stare into the south for some time, but there was no repetition of the strange light in the sky. He turned over onto his side and gazed into the blackness of the canyon to rest his strained eyes.

For fully another hour he lay quiet, listening to the heavy breathing of his companions.

A sound came through the stillness, a sharp, metallic clashing that brought Hatfield bolt upright on his blanket. It was such a sound as is made by a horse's iron striking a stone. It seemed to come from the blackness of the canyon.

Hatfield sat listening intently, every nerve strung tight. The sound was not repeated. Then, with paralyzing suddenness all hades broke loose in the black canyon. There was a roar of gunfire, a wild yelling, the snap and crackle of swung slickers, a drumroll of beating hoofs. Hatfield bounded to his feet.

The cattle were milling wildly and bellowing with fright. As the pandemonium behind them continued, they fled madly down the canyon, their hoofs clashing on the stones, their terrified bawls adding to the turmoil.

Tense, alert, Hatfield watched the herd thun-

[*Turn page*]

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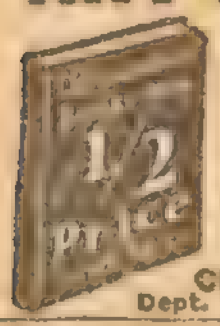

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der past. Close on the heels of the panic-stricken cattle came shadowy horsemen, yelling and shooting. Hatfield's hands streaked down and up. Both guns let loose with a rattling crash.

The exultant yells of the rustlers changed to howls of surprise and alarm. There was a scream of pain that ended in a choking rattle. A man pitched headlong from his saddle. An instant later another fell like a sack of old clothes.

Slim Dryden was out of his blankets, roaring profanity. He instantly sized up the situation and began shooting. The Lazy D punchers, dazed and half-awake, instinctively followed suit. Hatfield found his guns were empty and grabbed up a rifle.

There it is, hombres—action fast and furious, with a roar of bursting powder and the scream of six-gun lead. That's the tempo and tone of GOLD FOR THE DEAD from start to finish. A mystery novel about rustlers, Jim Hatfield's next opus in TEXAS RANGERS has a breath-taking crisis and a terrific punch for a surprise in the conclusion.

In addition to GOLD FOR THE DEAD, there will be another swell Frontier Post chat by Captain Starr and a group of splendid short stories by our outstanding Western writers. Be on hand for this banner issue.

OUR MAIL BOX

HERE'S good news for fans that have been asking for Goldy's picture on the cover of TEXAS RANGERS. After we got through adding up the letters making such a request, we talked the situation over with our Art Department and the boss there promised us faithfully that he would get a good artist to work on the idea as soon as possible. So be on the look-out for results, pards.

Another important matter we have to attend to right pronto is in giving two veterans a mighty important address. They wrote us as follows:

I am a steady reader of TEXAS RANGERS and enjoy the magazine very much. I have just finished reading THE LUCKY HAMMER. I think this is one of the best stories that I have read. In OUR MAIL BOX I read about the question of Jim Hatfield marrying. I think he should. It is natural for a man to marry, and I think he should marry a frontier girl to help him work on some of his cases with him.

Also I read about veterans settling down in the West. I have lived seventeen years in Wyoming and about one year in Idaho before I came into the Navy. I will get out of the Navy in 1949, and I intend to settle down in Wyoming and start a cattle ranch. If you could give me information about cattle and Wyoming, I would really appreciate it. I have worked with cattle for quite a while, but there is still a lot I don't know.—*John W. Parsons, U.S.N.*

While reading your July issue, I read the letter by L. G. Flannery about Wyoming, and I would appreciate all the information you could give me on the coal mining sections. I am a veteran, having served seventeen months on the U.S.S. Massachusetts.—*Crockett Osborne, Kimball, W. Va.*

Well, Mr. Osborne and Mr. Parsons, you'll just have to write to the following place for

the information that you wish. And then you will get dope on the cattle business that has been especially prepared for veterans like you. We certainly wouldn't have enough space to print it. This address is:

Department of Commerce and Industry, State Capitol, Cheyenne, Wyoming.

While we are at it, we might print some of those letters which mention Jim Hatfield's horse:

I read TEXAS RANGERS regularly. I think Jim Hatfield is super. I'd like to see a big picture on the front page, that is, Goldy, Jim's sorrel. The story THE LUCKY HAMMER was swell. Also LONG SAM COLLECTS A BOUNTY by Lee Bond. Doc Swap is a favorite of mine and is always interesting.—*Aureola N. Howe, Shoreham, Vermont.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for some time now, and I think it is perfect. I like the short stories, but Jim Hatfield takes the blue ribbon. Jackson Cole can really make a story of the wild West seem real to life. I thought THE CRIMSON FLOWER was a very good story. Say, how about having Goldy on the cover with Jim Hatfield?—*L. E. Nevin, Peoria, Ill.*

Your book, TEXAS RANGERS, has given my family more enjoyment than any other Western book we have ever read. My husband and I like the exciting and thrilling novels of Jim Hatfield. We never fail to get the new issue. As an example of how I like the stories, I have made an oil painting of Jim and Goldy, in a frame, and hung it in my son's bedroom.—*Mrs. B. Murphy, Ripley, Tenn.*

Sorry we can't print a lot more of our mail, but we certainly do read it all. We take your suggestions mighty seriously, for they do help us to improve the magazine. So if you have any ideas or want to make any suggestions, please drop us a postcard or a letter. The address is The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks a million for writing us. We'll be seeing you next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

THE ABALONE RING

(Concluded from page 72)

"Look, Mart. 'Curly' is a nickname, and Wolfe's given name is Henderson. Right?" Linster went on.

"Right," the chief deputy said. "One thing I wish yuh'd tell me though, Stape, before we head out for town. Yuh claimed that somethin' was wrong with the picture here, and whatever it was, it had a heap to do with startin' Curly to shootin'. Eh?"

Linster grinned. He had paid Henry Garland back, and he felt good over it.

"Zack's holster there shows that he's right-handed," he explained to Ensley. "Wolfe made a mistake and put the abalone ring on Zack's left hand. Get it, don't yuh?"

Ensley grinned too, and not like a horse eating briars.

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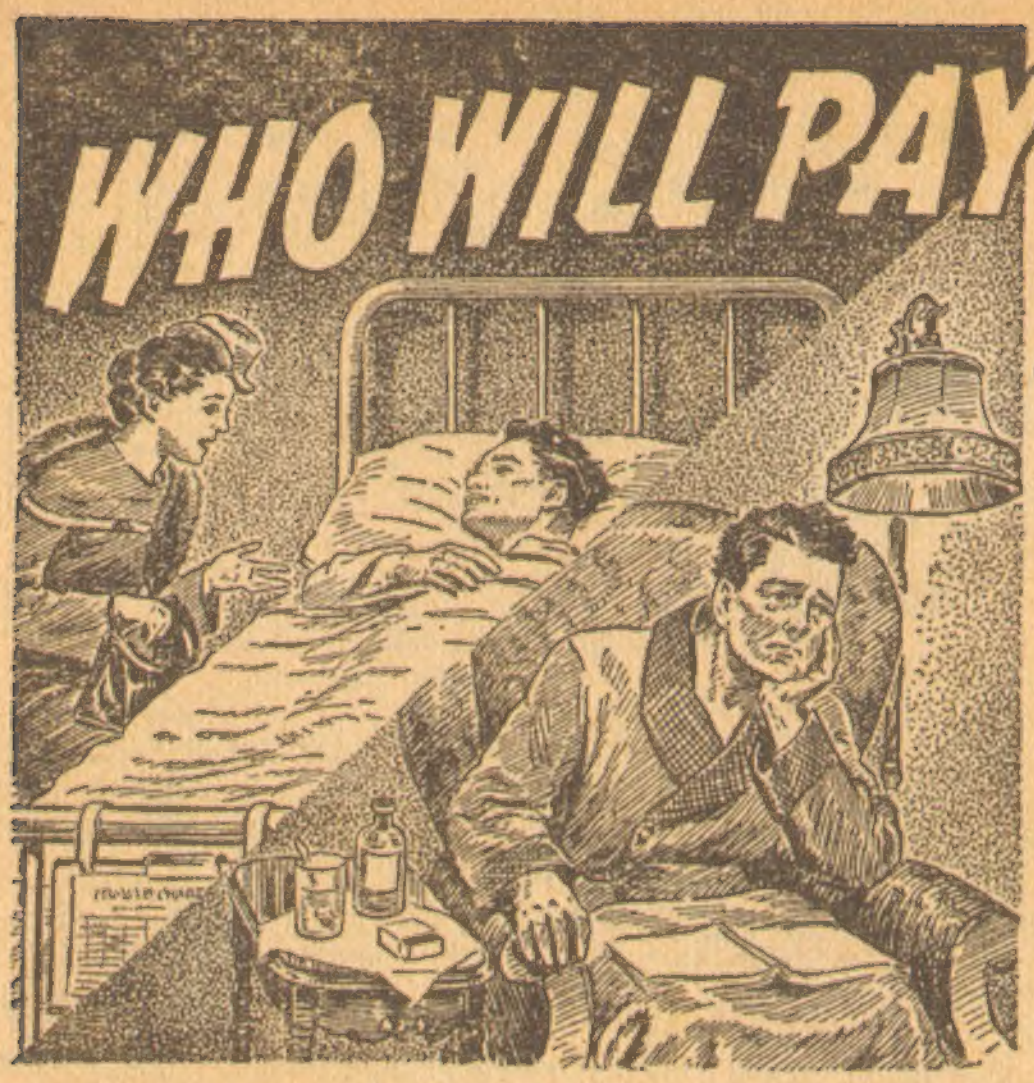

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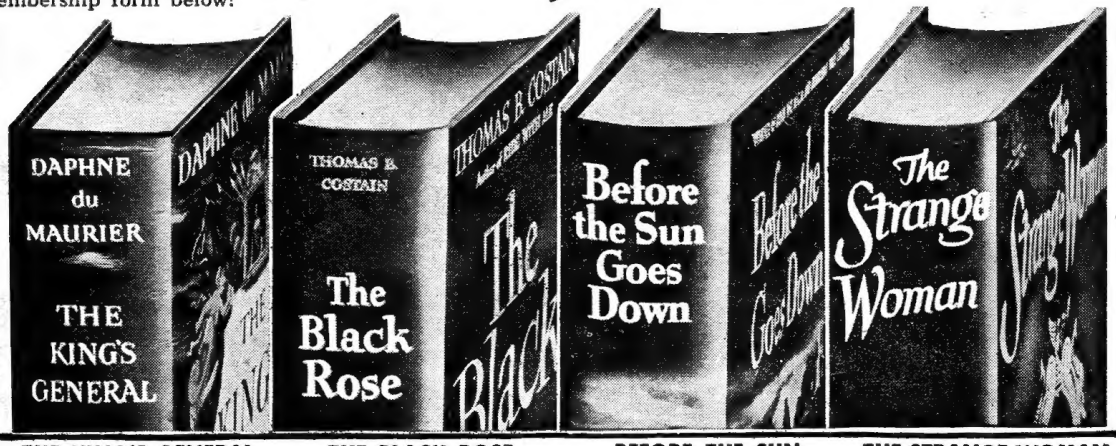

THE KING'S GENERAL
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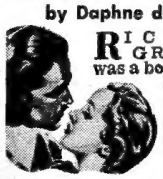

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